

A Call to Prayer (A)

As Dr. Karen Majewski (My-ev-ski) drove up to the small brick city hall building in Hamtramck, Michigan on April 13, 2004, she noticed a number of news trucks parked out front. “ABC, NBC, Fox News, that’s not a good omen, you know.”¹ Just a few months prior, Majewski became president of the city council: she still considered herself a reluctant newcomer to politics. At the sight of the news trucks, Majewski recalled: “You want to keep driving and head over the Ambassador Bridge (to Canada).” Yet she knew instantly why the press had gathered in her tiny city: the broadcast of the call to prayer.

When Majewski moved to Michigan for graduate school, she wanted to find an ethnic urban neighborhood like her hometown of Chicago: a front-porch community where she would hear different languages spoken on the street. For a scholar specializing in immigration and ethnicity, Hamtramck was “the only perfect place.” Her years in academia are often reflected in her speech, self-possessed demeanor, and her personal style: she wears her long hair in a stylish bun and carefully selects vintage clothing and subtle touches of ethnic jewelry. Just before Majewski was drafted to run for city council, she completed her Ph.D. and published a book on Polish-American identity. She had no political aspirations beyond her work on the city’s historical commission, yet she welcomed being part of a shift away from “the Polish old guard” to a progressive, new urbanism agenda.

Hamtramck is just over 2.1 square miles, and home to nearly 25,000 people: today, it is the most densely populated and the most internationally diverse city in the state. “It really is an old school urban neighborhood ... with houses on 30 foot lots, right next to each other. We live on top of each other.” Hamtramck shares a zip code, and most of its border, with Detroit. Both cities grew and thrived along with the auto industry; today, both are in emergency management with deep financial woes. Majewski described Hamtramck as “gritty and hardscrabble,” but added that the economic challenges of the city are longstanding: “We’re down but we’re not out. That could be our slogan,” she laughs.

Today, the city’s official slogan is: “A Touch of the World in America.” The city saw earlier waves of German, French, and Ukrainian immigrants, and a well-established African American population, before the Poles began settling in Hamtramck. For more than five decades, the city has been predominantly Polish, from its churches and bakeries to its festivals: every Mayor has been Polish. Newer waves of immigrants came from Yemen, Bosnia, and Bangladesh in recent years. By 2004, nearly one third of Hamtramck’s population was estimated to be Muslim², with three mosques in the city’s 2.1 square miles.

Majewski heard the call to prayer regularly back when she lived just a few blocks over the Hamtramck line in Detroit. “It seemed like a nice thing. I liked hearing the call.... Really, I marvel at my naïveté now.” When the city council received the request to broadcast the call to prayer from Al-Islah Islamic Center, a predominantly Bangladeshi mosque, Majewski thought it would be a “simple administrative process” to amend the existing noise ordinance. “I think, to most of us, it was already allowed by the constitution, and the question was ‘how do we do this in a way that works for the community?’” Yet public hearings drew increasing numbers of residents, rising emotions, and the presence of the media. Some expressed concerns about unwanted noise and proselytizing; supporters compared the call to the sounding of church bells. She explained, “You know it’s one thing for NBC to come in, and they have a story they want to tell, and they want drama and divisiveness, and conflict.” But for people living in a small city, Majewski understood that the broadcast of the call to prayer was more complex than any sound bite.

This is your street, and your house, and your window that’s open that’s hearing this. And your neighbors, the old Polish lady that you grew up with died and her kids sold the house to a woman in a burqa, you know. I have a lot of sympathy for the human drama, the individual drama, of dealing with those kinds of changes and issues. For the people who opposed the call, I had a lot of sympathy: individually, psychically, dealing with their world changing around them. That’s a profoundly sympathetic position.

She added:

And the immigrants coming in who want the community they live in to reflect themselves, and feel at home in that community: they are making their home literally in front of us, building a home and building a community and building an identity... You come to a place where you don't know the language, the terrain is different, the houses are different ... every little aspect of your life is changed. That is such a brave thing to do, and such a hopeful thing to do.

What she thought would be a “practical matter” had suddenly become national news. On that April night which marked the first public hearing on the noise ordinance, Majewski focused on staying calm and giving everyone a chance to speak. She recalled: “I felt profoundly challenged and stressed to do this right. Really, to do it in a way that brought honor to who we are as a city.” She steeled herself for what would come next.

Abdul Motlib: A Request

In 2004, Hamtramck was home to three mosques: the primarily Yemeni Mu'ath Bin Jamal Mosque, the Bosnian American Islamic Center, and Al-Islah Islamic Center, a Bangladeshi mosque. Al-Islah, located in a modest two-story building with green awnings, faced the towering St. Ladislaus Catholic Church across Caniff Street, a busy commercial area with Polish bakeries and halal butcher shops. The bells of St. Lad's rang three times a day; at Al-Islah, the *adhan* was called five times a day inside. In Detroit and Dearborn, mosques have publically broadcast the *adhan*, or call to prayer, for years. Yet when Abdul Motlib (Mot-leeb), Al-Islah's president, first made a formal request to the Hamtramck city council in September 2003, it was refused due to an existing noise ordinance.

Motlib, like many others at Al-Islah, came to Michigan by way of New York, drawn by a lower cost of living and a vital Muslim community. A factory worker, Motlib has a quick smile and often wears a kurta and kufi. He found Hamtramck to be a welcoming place, and noted that the city, “with its cheap, small houses”³ reminded him of his hometown. Motlib soon emerged as a leader in Hamtramck's rapidly growing Bangladeshi community. He explained, “The prospect of broadcasting the call to prayer first crossed our minds when we first opened the mosque in 2003. It is a tradition that has been continued in mosques all over the world since the time of the prophet... We wanted to continue this tradition.”⁴ Motlib sought approval from the city council out of a desire to be “considerate and respectful to our neighbors, both Muslim and non-Muslim.”⁵ With recent elections bringing in a new city council in Hamtramck, including its first Muslim member, Motlib decided to once again ask for permission before beginning to broadcast the prayer. He sent a letter to the city council on December 28, 2003. It began:

This letter is a request for an amendment to the City of Hamtramck's Ordinance No. 434, which prohibits unlawful noise and sounds. As part of the Islamic religion, it is our duty to "call" all Muslims to prayer five times a day. This is a short Arabic verse that takes approximately two minutes to complete. As an Islamic Center in the City of Hamtramck, we are requesting that this calling to prayer is permitted to be done on a loud speaker at the five intervals during the day and night.⁶

Motlib explained that the Islamic Center would submit a new schedule each year, as the exact prayer times shift daily due to changes in sunrise and sunset. He added: “The Islamic Center is located on a very commercial street; therefore few people will feel disturbed by the loudspeaker. This calling can be respected just as a Church's bells are.”⁷ After listing three mosques in the city of Detroit that broadcast the call, Motlib noted: “As a very culturally diverse community, by permitting this action it will build our city to become more united and familiar with each other's religion.”⁸ The letter concluded by pledging cooperation and thanking the council for their attention to the request. He was hopeful that soon, Al-Islah would broadcast the call from speakers mounted on the rooftop.

Members of the council indicated their support for amending the noise ordinance, and scheduled a public hearing. When Motlib arrived at city hall on April 13, he was surprised at the number of people in attendance. “We went there, we saw a lot of people. So many people. ... Against the call to prayer.”⁹ The next week, another hearing was scheduled: “We think that day no problem. Even myself, I go to my work, I say, ‘This public hearing is finished.’”¹⁰ But the crowd continued to grow, and a third hearing was scheduled for April 27. Motlib recalled, “First floor, second floor, third floor, full! People coming from different states, different areas.” Motlib explained: “They don’t want to listen to the call to prayer in Hamtramck. But they tell their story, we tell our story.”¹¹

Three Public Hearings

Over the course of three public hearings, both supporters and opponents of the amendment to the noise ordinance spoke. Observers described the meetings as contentious but civil: the most notable exceptions, they explained, were comments from people who didn’t live in Hamtramck. Many of those who supported amending the noise ordinance were members of the Muslim community:

... Today some people are saying that Hamtramck is being taken over by Muslims. But Hamtramck is not being taken over by Muslims. Hamtramck is being rebuilt by Muslims. Look at Conant five years ago, and look at it today. There was hardly any abundance of buildings there five years ago. There was just closed buildings, closed doors. And from then, Conant Street was being rebuilt by Muslims.¹²

[A] gentleman before me mentioned that he is a citizen of this country. Well, he is not the only citizen of this country. We are all citizens of this country. I can recall that my grandfather served this country in WWII. And don’t push this, “If you’re not for me, you are against me.” We are here to ask the honorable council to take a leadership role and to pass this amendment for the community. I have been here for 26 years. ... and we ask you for a simple thing—to allow the call to prayer. ... Now, we hear the bells everyday, every hour, we never say nothing. We never say the bells call us to prayer. Now, we are citizens of this country. Just because of the way we look, you think we come in yesterday. But we contribute to this country, and we’ve been here in the city longer than some of you.¹³

Bismillah ar-rahman ar-rahim. ... I recently moved to Hamtramck about six month ago and I have enjoyed being here in Hamtramck. ... The adhan has been going on for many years, long before any of us were even here. It has been practiced for maybe 1500 years. So, for them to try and pass some kind of law that would hinder us from being able to practice that would cause a feeling of oppression in our hearts, that we weren’t able to do this, and I think that if that kind of law were passed, that we couldn’t do this in a country that claims freedom for everybody, I think that at that point we would all have to accept the hypocrisy of that statement. ... I would ask our non-Muslim brothers and sisters to be tolerant of that please, and to understand that it is not a call for you to cease worshipping what you worship, but a call for Muslims to come and pray together.¹⁴

Some of those who spoke in support of the amendment to the noise ordinance identified as non-Muslims:

... I was born two miles from here. That gentleman there who has been a citizen for two weeks has the same rights as I do. ... I have the right to make noise any time of the day. If I want to play my saxophone on my front lawn, I can do it. But I want to say, what is going on here is a true example of democracy. This is democracy in action, this is what we live in this country for. People are going to have differences of opinion. We are going to argue and disagree, sometimes vehemently. We are not going to get out our weapons, as someone suggested, we are going to leave this place, whatever the decision is, and we’re going to try to live together, in peace and harmony. We have to get together and there is no other choice. ... I’m proud that Hamtramck is going to set a precedent for the entire country. This is amazing that you guys have to decide something important. It’s got to be done sometime, and even though I’m not a Muslim and I’m not a Christian and I have my rights, I want freedom for all religions.¹⁵

A larger number of speakers expressed concern about the amendment to the noise ordinance:

I am here because this hurts my heart, my soul, my inner spiritual being. ... I respect the Muslims, their religion, their God, but I don't have to hear their God praised in my ear five times a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year. And where can I go, I am 68 years old, and where will I go? ... You want me to go? No, I will not leave! It's my country, too, just as it is yours. I respect you, I have no malice for any of you, I just want my rights also, and that is to adore my God in my own home and not have to listen to a God I don't believe in—Allah.¹⁶

And if this council passes this noise ordinance then you are going against the constitution because you are not giving me the right to force my religion on somebody, you are forcing their religion on me. And I have no choice but to hear them five times a day, fifteen minutes out of every day, maybe two hours a week, maybe 1,000 hours a year, that I have to listen to them telling me about Allah, how great he is. My God tells me, 'You want to pray, go into the silence of a room and close the door and talk to me there.' I don't need any amplification through horns of anything telling me who Allah is. I know who God is.¹⁷

Everyone keeps talking about their rights. The rights of Christians have been stripped from them for the last 30 years of this country. And you are doing the same thing. This [City Hall building] used to be a Catholic hospital. With a cross. With the Ten Commandments. Bibles, with prayers, but it's now a city building, and you cannot, by law, allow any religious artifacts, or any religious undertones to take place in this facility. Yet last week, there was Muslim prayer allowed downstairs, during the council meeting. I will guarantee you, that if Christians had tried to hold a Bible study downstairs, it would have lasted 15 [minutes.] I also guarantee you that if Christians were trying to do what Muslims are doing here, the ACLU would shut us down in 72 hours.¹⁸

I've lived in Hamtramck all my life over 81 years and I have this to say. ... The Muslims are allowed to pray in their mosques, there are hardly any cities that face this problem. And I think that the grace belongs on the other side. If you really think about it, intolerance doesn't come from the few people who object to this, because they have a right to object, but it comes from the other side. Before this, everybody got along. They speak their own language in their homes, they teach their children the religion they want, freedom of religion is not denied to them. ... Why agitate this entire community?¹⁹

At the end of the third and final public hearing on April 27, the Council voted unanimously to approve the amendment to the noise ordinance. The new ordinance read: "The City shall permit 'call to prayer,' 'church bells,' and other reasonable means of announcing religious meetings to be amplified between the hours of 6:00 a.m. and 10:00 p.m. for a duration not to exceed five minutes."²⁰ It gave the City Council "sole authority to set the level of amplification"²¹ and stated that any complaints were to be filed with the City Clerk. The ordinance would be effective beginning May 25, 2004. Al-Islah would begin broadcasting the call on Friday, May 28.²²

Robert Zwolak: A Matter of Noise

From the beginning, Robert Zwolak explained, "it was a matter of noise."²³ Like many residents, Zwolak wasn't born in Hamtramck, and his first language wasn't English. He spent the first three years of his life in Detroit, under the care of his Polish grandmother while his parents worked in a factory. He would later move to California and learn English, but it took many years for him to fully master the language and he struggled at school: "We didn't have English as a Second Language like we do today." Zwolak returned to Hamtramck to attend high school, marry, and raise five children. He is now a grandfather with white hair, but appears younger than his age might suggest.

Zwolak, slight in frame with a deep voice, noted, "It was a different community back then." He explained, "You had parochial schools, you had a lot more church activity, a number of veterans organizations, over 100 bars in

town. It was basically a blue collar town, of factory workers.” He added that Hamtramck has always been a “springboard community” with earlier waves of Germans, Poles, Ukrainians, Italians, and Yugoslavians and later waves of Yemenis, Bosnians, and Bangladeshis. “So when it occurred it was kind of subtle, it wasn’t overly apparent other than when the Bangladeshis came in, the initial big wave, you would see their dress and their cultural garb. Very obvious.” As the hall manager at the Knights of Columbus in Hamtramck, Zwolak witnessed these changes first-hand: “And I had a great experience with the Hindus, the Bangladeshis, the Yemenis, the Buddhists, who would rent the hall for their weddings and religious ceremonies, and baptisms, you name it-- to really see a different culture.”

When the call to prayer issue came up, Zwolak attended the hearings, and listened to residents voicing their objections and resentment. He noticed that there were many Muslim men who spoke in support of the call, and many Christian women who spoke against it. For those who opposed it, a few expressed prejudice and some expressed concern about evangelization; Zwolak recalled that most simply didn’t want to have to hear the noise. He added, “But then, as the controversy became more public, you could then see more charged feelings between people.” For Zwolak, there was a simple way to resolve this: “Put it on the ballot and let the people decide.” After the city council voted to amend the noise ordinance, Zwolak knew that he had a limited time period to get a petition circulated to put the issue on the ballot. He served as city clerk years before, and knew this was his best recourse.

It took little effort to get more than 600 signatures. Yet, he noted, “...in facilitating the petition, and getting the petition out there on the ballot, my name of course was attached as the ringleader, so to speak.” Soon, he was receiving phone calls from all over the country. “I was getting calls from radio stations for interviews. I was getting calls from a religious group that wanted to come in and do some type of a cultural statement. And my response: ‘No. This is not a religious issue: it is a noise issue.’ And I didn’t want to get engaged in that type of situation.”

Early in his political career, back in the 1980s, Zwolak led a successful effort to recall half of the city council due to mismanagement. “So I’ve had my share of conflicts. But again, it’s always been ‘let the people decide.’ If you don’t like it, then you have the choice to make a change. And if you need to make a change now, then make a change now. It’s the democratic process.”

Rev. Sharon Buttry: An Interfaith Concern

Small and gentle in speech and manner, Rev. Sharon Buttry (Buh-tree) had little interest in attending the hearings about the call to prayer or making political statements. An American Baptist Minister working at an Evangelical church outreach center providing ESL classes in Hamtramck, Buttry noted: “I don’t go to council meetings. I find them to be very dysfunctional.”²⁴ She explained, “I knew there were plenty of articulate people who were going to be there, and I felt like my best option was to work behind the scenes.” From the beginning, Buttry explained, it was an interfaith concern: “The problem was that the Catholic church across the street was amplifying the church bells from their tower, they were no longer ringing them by hand. So the Catholic priest and the leaders of the mosque came together to amend this ordinance to satisfy both the Catholic church and the mosque.” She added, “[a] lot of people say, ‘Well, you know, the Muslims just came in and then they wanted what they wanted, and pushed it through: that wasn’t true at all.’”

She believed that most of the local people who opposed the call were struggling with changes to their community, complicated by difficult economic times: “So I think the call to prayer is a daily reminder, several times a day, that things are really changing. And it’s not going back to the good old days, or whatever they thought it was.” Yet for those who opposed the call and didn’t even live or work in Hamtramck, she felt differently. “...there were some really strident protestors who came up from Ohio. [“David’s Mighty Men”]... That was embarrassing and very frustrating for me.” She explained, “I feel ashamed when people act like that and say they are representing my faith. So that was very upsetting to me.”

A Call to Prayer (A)

With tensions rising in the community, an informal local clergy group emerged with the help of interfaith leaders from neighboring communities. For Buttry, this was her first involvement in interfaith work, and the first time she entered a mosque. “And I was very, very honored, and humbled to be invited into that space, where that was going to be worked out in our community.” With rising media interest, Buttry was even called upon by leaders at Al-Islah to act as their spokesperson: she understood that Motlib and others didn’t want to have to express something this important in a second language. Buttry explained, “...religious liberty is such a huge part of our Baptist heritage. It never occurred to me to not be for the call to prayer.” Her church outreach center was not Baptist-affiliated, and some of her colleagues were critical of her involvement in the controversy. “I took some heat.” Buttry, undaunted, continued her “relational work,” and added, “I always feel like your life speaks more than your words anyway. I just continue to live my faith by my conscience, which is another Baptist principle: freedom of conscience.”

While she was honored to take a public role as the leader of the newly-formed Hamtramck Interfaith Partners, Buttry preferred private discussion and relationship-building. “I have a reputation over the years of being fair-minded and able to talk to people on both sides of an issue.” She described herself as “a fairly close friend” of Robert Zwolak, who served on a non-profit board with her. Buttry knew that there were some who wanted to demonize Zwolak or others who opposed changing the noise ordinance to permit the broadcast of the call. “I’ve known him to have an incredibly kind and compassionate heart towards people who are down and out. So I just think it is interesting when you get into these polarized situations, how easy it is to cut off relationships, and I try not to do that. I try to reach out over those boundaries and maintain the relationships.”

Buttry saw the controversy over the call as an issue of identity: “[T]his community in Hamtramck had such a strong identity built around Polish values and culture, Polish Catholic values and culture. Neat as a pin yards; people going out and washing the sidewalk. There’s this whole reckoning back to the old days when the city looked so beautiful and pristine.” Yet she added that those were different times, economically and culturally. “It’s hard to let go when they perceive that it’s worsening, rather than improving. Everyone wants things to improve rather than fall apart. So I think the call to prayer is a daily reminder, several times a day, that things are really changing. And it’s not going back to the good old days, or whatever they thought it was.”

A Pope, A Petition, A Public Vote

On May 12, Motlib and a small group of supporters of the call to prayer came together at what locals often call “Pope Park.” A short walk from Al-Islah, the park features an elevated 10-foot statue of Pope John Paul II, commissioned by the city to honor the first Polish Pope. At the fundraising event to help improve the park and statue, the call to prayer was not mentioned, but speakers directly referenced the Pope’s respect for Islam.

Less than one week later, on May 18, Zwolak submitted the petition to Hamtramck city hall. It included over 600 signatures, more than was required, and asked that the City Council rescind the amendment to the noise ordinance. Since the City Council would not agree to rescind the amendment, the matter would go to a public vote. Until that time, the existing noise ordinance would stand, unamended.

After months of discussion and debate, the issue would finally come to a vote in Hamtramck on July 20, 2004.

Endnotes

¹ All quotes from Karen Majewski: Karen Majewski, interview by author, Hamtramck, Michigan, August 11, 2014.

² Tim Jones, “Islamic Prayer Call Stirs Tension,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 21, 2004, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2004_04_21/news/0404210290_1_immigrant_muslims_halal_meat_arabic, accessed October 2014.

³ Issac Weiner, *Religion Out Loud: Religious Sound, Public Space, and American Pluralism* (New York: NYU Press, 2013) <http://muse.jhu.edu/books/9780814708064>, ccessed ugust 014, . 62.

⁴ Abdul Motlib, correspondence with author, November 2014.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Alissa Marlene Perkins, "From the Mosque to the Municipality: The Ethics of Muslim Space in a Midwestern City" (Ph.D. diss, University of Texas at Austin, 2012), pp. 414, https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/bitstream/handle/2152/19619/perkins_dissertation_20129.pdf?sequence=1, accessed September 2014.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Abdul Motlib, as quoted in Building Islam in Detroit: Foundations/ Forms/ Futures website, Al Islah Islamic Center video by Sally Howell, http://biid.lsa.umich.edu/2011/06/al_islah_islamic_center/, ccessed ugust 014.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Alissa Marlene Perkins, "From the Mosque to the Municipality: The Ethics of Muslim Space in a Midwestern City" (Ph.D. diss, University of Texas at Austin, 2012), p. 274, https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/bitstream/handle/2152/19619/perkins_dissertation_20129.pdf?sequence=1, accessed September 2014.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 247.

¹⁵ Ibid, p. 279 80.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 261.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 266 67.

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 271.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 272.

²⁰ Issac Weiner, "Religion Out Loud: Religious Sound, Public Space, and American Pluralism" (Ph.D. diss, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2009) https://cdr.lib.unc.edu/indexablecontent/uuid:612cc167_91cd_41d1_b765_2714d3292f0e, ccessed eptember 014, . 01.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ All quotes from Robert Zwolak: Robert Zwolak, interview by author, Hamtramck, Michigan, August 12, 2014.

²⁴ All quotes from Sharon Buttry: Sharon Buttry, interview by author, Detroit, Michigan, August 10, 2014.