A Call to Prayer (B)

More than six months after Abdul Motlib sent a request to the Hamtramck Common Council to amend the city’s noise ordinance, the question of the call to prayer finally came to a public vote. The news trucks were once again parked outside of city hall on July 20, 2004, but this time, Dr. Karen Majewski felt relieved. Of the 2,662 votes cast, only 1,200 voted to repeal the amendment to the noise ordinance.\(^1\) She stated, “I think that it is to the credit of the residents of Hamtramck that they voted to uphold the amendment.”\(^2\)

Majewski was angry that the issue had ever gone to the ballot: “We saw it as a constitutional issue, and that’s not subject to a public vote.” By the time of the vote in July, she recalled, tensions in Hamtramck diffused. She noted, “…the mosque did a really smart thing, rather than waiting for the vote, they started doing the call. So by the time the vote came … people had already been hearing it for a month, six weeks. And the sky hadn’t fallen in.” She noted, “Without the ordinance in place, the mosque started doing what they always had the right to do anyway: to do the call, now without regulation.” Majewski felt that one of “the ironies” about the controversy over the call to prayer was the fact that the amendment to the noise ordinance actually imposed regulation on the practice.

Al-Islah Islamic Center broadcast the first official call to prayer in Hamtramck on May 28, 2004. With the help of the Council of Islamic Organizations in Michigan and the state’s NCCJ (National Conference of Community and Justice), Al-Islah hosted an open house and press conference beforehand: local clergy, council members, regional interfaith leaders, and press filled the small mosque. After a series of speakers spoke on themes of unity, Majewski was presented with a key, giving her symbolic control of the amplification system. With a scarf draped loosely over her head, Majewski posed briefly for the assembled media with the key.\(^3\) Shortly after, the muezzin recited the call to prayer, broadcast from speakers mounted on the rooftop. Media reports noted that the first broadcast call could barely be heard above the traffic bustling along the busy street.\(^4\) For Abdul Motlib, the call to prayer brought with it many emotions, along with a sense of “accomplishment, relief, and most of all tranquility because of how beautiful the call itself is.”\(^5\) After the long months leading up to that day, Motlib explained that on May 28, 2004, he was “showered with joy and happiness.”

Two days before the first call to prayer, a small group of Evangelical Christian protestors from Ohio, “David’s Mighty Men,” held a protest outside of Al-Islah: the protest was punctuated by the blowing of the shofar, a ram’s horn traditionally associated with the Jewish High Holidays. Yet on May 28, there were no protestors, just a large press presence. Rev. Sharon Buttry, representing the newly-formed Hamtramck Interfaith Partners, spoke at the news conference: “…in Hamtramck, my neighbor churches in the church, the mosque and the temple. … I am glad for the call to prayer, because not only is it a call to prayer, it is a reminder to all of us to live our faith in love and mutual respect.”\(^6\)

After the first broadcast call in late May, Hamtramck Interfaith Partners (HIP) hosted a number of “relational” events, culminating in what they termed “A Day of Prayer” on the special election on July 20. Supporters and opponents held formal and informal gatherings, including fellowship meetings and press conferences. By the end of the day, representatives from the interfaith community gathered to celebrate, and Motlib recited the call to prayer. He told a reporter, “Now we truly have approval from the residents of the city. … It’s a long time we are waiting for this.” Motlib later reflected, “Muslim vote in Hamtramck city is like 4 or 500. So how we get 1462? Of course, other community people they are supporting us. They realize we can stand with them.”\(^7\)

Robert Zwolak, like many of Hamtramck’s residents who had voiced concerns at the meetings, was disappointed in the results. He explained, “…the wording wasn’t clear: a yes meant no and a no meant yes. And that was drafted by the council itself. People that had been circulating the petition, who were opposing it, were calling me and asking ‘How do I vote…?’”\(^8\) The text on the July 20 ballot read: “Shall Ordinance No. 503, which amended Ordinance No. 434, to allow the City to regulate the volume, direction, duration and time of Call to Prayer, Church Bells and other reasonable amplified means of announcing religious meetings, be repealed?”\(^9\)
Zwolak explained:

Again, it’s politics: when you’re allowing one group to do something that the other group doesn’t want, then let the community decide. You’re going to have people, even amongst the non-Muslims, who are going to say, ‘Hey, I don’t have a problem with it.’ And I can’t honestly say, if the wording was different on the ballot, would it have come out the same way if yes was yes and no was no? I don’t know. But we’ve gotten past that.

The first time Zwolak heard the call to prayer in Hamtramck in May 2004, he noticed it. But soon, he explained, “It is like having children. You learn how to tune it out. … Like living by the railroad tracks when the train comes by, or like living by a freeway.”

Following the vote, Hamtramck’s Noise Ordinance was amended to 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.” The amendment gave “sole authority to set the level of amplification” to the City Council, but noted that no level would be enforced “until all religious institutions receive notice of such levels.” Complaints were to be filed with the Clerk and placed on the agenda of the next regular meeting of the City Council.

10 Years Later

10 years later, the controversy over the call to prayer has largely faded away; however, Hamtramck’s economic challenges continue. With many people fleeing Detroit, Hamtramck’s total population remains relatively stable, and civic leaders are hopeful; however, boarded up storefronts and houses still dot the landscape of the tiny city. Just off I-75, the yard of a single family home in a row of tidy houses is overgrown with weeds, the door boarded up. A spray painted message covers the wooden planks: “Don’t remember me like this… Remember the way I used to be.”

Many Hamtramck residents can’t recall a time in which the call to prayer was not broadcast from Al-Islah: it is estimated that half of those who live in the city today have been there for less than five years. Standing in downtown Hamtramck when the adhan is sounded, it can be difficult to know exactly where it is coming from: locals explain that the sound can shift depending on the wind and weather. As of late 2014, there are now seven mosques in Hamtramck, and all broadcast the call to prayer. For Motlib, the sound evokes both “history and meaning,” adding: “It is a whole body experience because it forces us to drop what we are doing and listen. It also reminds me of one of the benefits of the call to prayer, which is when broadcasted, we believe that Satan runs away because he cannot stand the sound of Allah’s name.”

Shortly after the call to prayer controversy, Dr. Karen Majewski became the mayor of Hamtramck, a position that she has held for almost a decade. Overall, she believes her training as a scholar of immigration has helped her in this role: “[W]hat I see is the patterns over time. Regardless of ethnic group, regardless of generation, regardless of the time period when this group formed its identity in the U.S., the patterns are pretty much the same. And it’s really helped to have that perspective. …Knowing what I do about the Polish community, and seeing it continue to evolve; it’s not like a done deal.” This knowledge also helps her to deal with the emotional impact of these changes: her own church, St. Ladislau, is on the list of churches to be closed by the Detroit Archdiocese. She welcomes the continued growth of the Muslim community, and the new mosques, but is concerned that some are being established in commercial areas, taking prime real estate off of the tax rolls.

Majewski notes that her studies of immigration are also helpful in recognizing the internal diversity of each community:

To the outsider, those communities look monolithic. On the inside, of course you see all of the fragmentation, all of the power struggles, all of the factions, all of the issues that don’t get aired publically.
…There’s a lot going on in those communities. We may judge one or the other from what we see in the newspaper, or this person that we know, or what we see at a council meeting, or in the political arena, but in reality, there is a world that they are living in that we have no idea of, and that’s informing their decisions and their strategies as a community.

During the controversy, despite the evident diversity of ethnicity and language in Hamtramck’s Muslim community, little diversity of opinion about the call to prayer was evident in the public conversation. However, a more recent Hamtramck Review article entitled “Residents complain that the ‘call to prayer’ is too loud,” included comments from Muslims suggesting that the sound should be turned down; some directly questioned the use of loudspeakers. One comment, from a citizen who identified himself as a Yemeni Muslim, stated, in part: “The prophet PBUH never used loudspeakers to call the Athan, people have watches they can use to know what [time] the prayer is. If anything, the Athan shouldn’t be [called] outside the timeframe of work hours (10am – 6pm) to avoid bothering non Muslims with the sound when they are relaxing.”

Today, the city council – like the city itself – is half Muslim. Majewski notes, “[T]he city really is always changing.” She added, “The newest immigrant group here are not Bangladeshi or Yemeni, it is the hipsters, who’ll make the next wave of changes in the landscape of the city. It is a much more fluid demographic than people realize.” In the midst of that change, Majewski holds tight to her “ideal” vision of the city: “…of openness and welcoming, and working through difficult questions together.”

After the Call: Interfaith Activity

Looking back, Motlib acknowledges the formal and informal interfaith efforts that supported the call to prayer, whether the director of a local think tank who wrote Op-Ed pieces or the Catholic priest from St. Lad’s across the street who was a steadfast ally. He notes: “Despite the opposition, I felt a strong support from the interfaith community and I believe that their votes of confidence and support had a huge role in the final outcome. I was very grateful for everything they did for us.”

The Hamtramck Interfaith Partners continued bringing the community together for a couple of years after the controversy, including a dinner in August 2004 “A Celebration… Moving on to a Call for Dialogue and New Community,” held in the Bosnia and Herzegovina Association Hall. By then, it was no longer of interest to local and international press. At that event, Abdul Motlib commented, “…a crisis brought us together but the richness of our faith traditions will keep us together.” Yet over the years, interfaith activity in Hamtramck slowly faded. Buttry explains, “After a while, it became harder and harder to get people to come to meetings, because there was no focal point for us to dramatically gather around, and people just get busy.”

Then, in 2008, new allegiances formed in a battle over the Human Rights Ordinance (HRO): some understood the HRO as a protection for LGBT people in housing and employment; for others, the HRO mandated special privileges to a fringe group. While the HRO was defeated in a public referendum, some friendships formed in the common cause of the call to prayer were lost. Two years later in 2010, a new interfaith effort by Arif Huskic, a Bosnian Muslim refugee, began: the Common Word Alliance now works in Hamtramck on interfaith issues as well as pressing concerns like job creation and crime prevention. Buttry assists Huskic in this effort, while also serving on a newly formed interfaith Police Chaplaincy.

While Al-Islah is not actively involved in the Common Word Alliance or the city’s Police Chaplaincy, they maintain many of the interfaith and civic ties forged during the call to prayer controversy. Looking back, Abdul Motlib explained that the vote proved that “…Hamtramck people can live, get together different culture, different religion, different community. They don’t have problem with each other. So from that election still, we don’t feel anything bad. We feel very proud of it.” Today, Motlib, and other leaders of Al-Islah are now focused on a new project: the development of a landmark mosque, just footsteps away from the original building. Located in the heart of Hamtramck’s business district, the former Mellon Bank building stands at the city’s main intersection of Caniff and Campau. At 20,000 square feet, the building is much larger than the current 3,000 square foot mosque.
Fundraising materials for the project explain that “[t]he community has grown considerably and the existing mosques are unable to accommodate all worshippers for Jummuah and Eid prayer.”²² The flyer also mentions twice that Al-Islah “is the first mosque in America that is permitted by law, as voted by its citizens in the year 2004, to broadcast the call to prayer (adhan).”²³

### After the Call: At Home in Hamtramck

Today, Robert Zwolak is a member of the Hamtramck City Council, living in a senior community across the street from one of the city’s seven mosques. Recently, he distributed a “mini-petition” regarding the call to prayer being broadcast from the new mosque. He explained, “[T]he call to prayer there is absolutely blaring. Imposing, blaring, whatever.” With the petition, he noted, “We didn’t want to eliminate it, we just wanted them to tone it down. That’s all it was, just tone it down.” He explained that the police chief visited the mosque on more than one occasion, asking the sound to be reduced. But other than a few complaints about volume, Zwolak said, the controversy “has probably gone away.” He added:

> It has always been a noise issue; it’s still a noise issue. It’s not anything where people are intolerant of the call to prayer or what is being said. The community has basically been accustomed to the call to prayer, and all the other activities, the Eid, and the Ramadan. Some people are more friendly in terms of wishing people happy Ramadan or happy Eid, whatever the case may be. So you don’t see any real resentment or comments, other than a few people who are normally, naturally bigots and racists. You’re never going to change them, which is unfortunate, but they are few and far between.

Although he has been a part of city politics for some 40 years, and been connected to Hamtramck for more than 60 years, Zwolak no longer considers the city to be his “home town.”

> I’m beginning to lose some of that sense. Yeah, because my family, basically my entire family has left Hamtramck. And it’s not just cousins, my classmates, and we have such a different population. … Life was entirely different in Hamtramck. Hamtramck is just a constantly evolving, springboard community.

Buttry, however, has embraced Hamtramck as her new home. When the call to prayer controversy began, Buttry lived nearby in Warren, but chose to move with her family to Hamtramck shortly after. From her home today, she explains, “If the wind is just right, I can hear two calls to prayer.” Buttry continues to teach ESL in Hamtramck at an Evangelical Outreach Center and particularly enjoys preparing her students for their citizenship exams: “I truly enjoy teaching them about democracy.” While the call to prayer is rarely discussed in Hamtramck ten years later, when Buttry hears it driving through downtown or sitting on her front porch, she often pauses to reflect: “This is my city. And it’s just a reminder of the diversity that we have, and both the joy and the sorrow that comes with that. It’s poignant for me.”

### Endnotes


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


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A Call to Prayer (B)


Abdul Motlib, correspondence with author, November 2014.

Sharon Buttry to Interfaith Partners, case study regarding call to prayer organizing in Hamtramck, 2004, from Sharon Buttry.


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


Photograph by author:


From Rev. Buttry, Mayor Majewski, and Arif Huskic, interview by author, Hamtramck, Michigan, August 2014.

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Unless otherwise noted, all quotes from Sharon Buttry: Sharon Buttry, interview by author, Detroit, Michigan, August 10, 2014.

Alissa Perkins, “Negotiating Alliances: Muslims, gay rights and the Christian right in a Polish-American city,”

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20 Arif Huskic, interview by author, Hamtramck, Michigan, August 2014.


23 Ibid.