

Time out for Allah: The Hamtramck controversy

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [June 15, 2004](#) issue

Allahu akbar—"God is great!" Thus begins the sonorous Arabic chant that is worrying the citizens of Hamtramck, a mostly immigrant urban community of 23,000 near Detroit. In April the Hamtramck City Council voted unanimously to amend a noise ordinance so that the al-Islah Islamic Center, one of seven mosques that serve a growing Muslim population in what was once a Polish Catholic enclave, can broadcast the call to prayer five times a day by loudspeaker. As of this writing, however, opposition from some longtime residents may silence the loudspeaker until the matter is brought to a citywide vote. Meanwhile, white supremacist groups on the outside are making Hamtramck a cause célèbre, and unfortunately there is no noise ordinance to silence their fear-mongering.

Defenders of the city council's decision speak of the values of religious freedom and diversity. In this city where church bells ring freely, where a 12-foot bronze statue of John Paul II (tottering on a crumbling foundation) raises hands in benediction over the picnic tables of Pope Park, in this "Ellis Island of Michigan" where ethnic and religious plurality is an inescapable and resplendent fact, what grounds could there be for restricting the religious expression of the swelling ranks of Bangladeshi, Bosnian, Pakistani and Yemeni Muslims?

The main voices of opposition are not bigots but decent folks whose parents and grandparents labored and suffered to build a small community as vibrant with faith as the one they left behind. They are understandably worried to see their neighborhoods transformed, their numbers dwindling, their economy teetering like the statue in Pope Park. What would it be like, under such circumstances, to hear the Islamic call to prayer five times a day every day, without ceasing, without respite?

Disturbing, no doubt. Unless—and here is a venture full of hazards—one could find a way to hear the call to prayer not as an alien voice but as a summons, a periodic reminder, for Christians as well as Muslims, for Catholics and Protestants too, of the

“one thing needful.” It may not be a bad thing to wake each dawn to the admonition, “Prayer is better than sleep!” mixed in with the jackhammers, garbage trucks and school buses that make up the morning din. So many other influences conspire to tell us that sleep is better than prayer. So often we go about our day in a haze, forgetting that we are creatures, that our existence is on loan, that life is in earnest, that love is our business. It may not be a bad thing to be roused five times a day by the praise of God, even in an unfamiliar tongue.

Better still if another faith’s call to prayer prompts us to recover Christian practices that have suffered neglect. When church bells ring, do we hear a call to prayer? Not according to some of the protesters in Hamtramck; church bells, they maintain, “have no religious significance.” *Never send to ask for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.* Not so long ago, throughout Europe and possibly even in Hamtramck, church bells rang morning, noon and evening to summon householders, peasants in the field, workers in the factory and students at their books to set aside their labor and recite the Angelus, a perfect miniature of Christian gospel and creed. Like the liturgy of the hours, the Angelus was a Christian *salat*: an obligation but also a joy, a daily reminder of all that Christians believe, cherish and hope, a proving ground for Christian identity, a nursery for the seedlings of Christian culture. The Angelus was not outlawed so much as discarded. It seemed better to sleep.

Abraham Joshua Heschel speaks movingly of how he rediscovered the Jewish call to prayer during his student days in Berlin:

In those months in Berlin I went through moments of profound bitterness. I walked alone in the evenings through the magnificent streets of Berlin. I admired the solidity of its architecture, the overwhelming drive and power of a dynamic civilization. There were concerts, theaters, and lectures by famous scholars about the latest theories and inventions and I was pondering whether to go to the new Max Reinhardt play or to a lecture about the theory of relativity.

Suddenly I noticed the sun had gone down, evening had arrived. . . .

I had forgotten God—I had forgotten Sinai—I had forgotten that sunset is my business—that my task is “to restore the world to the kingship of the Lord.”

So I began to utter the words of the evening prayer.

Blessed art thou, Lord our God, King of the Universe, who by His word brings on the evening twilight . . .

“Sunset is my business.” The statutory times of Jewish prayer, from which the cycles of Christian and Islamic daily prayer derive, mark critical thresholds, moments when we can be roused from sleep into a state resembling human consciousness. We need such reminders. We need a tug of a string on our finger for those times when we fail to heed the tug of the string on our heart.

The Hamtramck controversy will be resolved by the faithful Christians and Muslims who live there, and who, because of their faith, prize hospitality. Though Christians and Muslims cannot pray in a common voice, the Hamtramck call to prayer can be heard as a reminder to all of us: Sunrise is our business. Prayer is better than sleep.