

“What is at Stake?” Exploring the Problems of Pluralism through the Case Method

By Ellie Pierce

International documents of interreligious dialogue, such as “A Common Word Between Us and You,” regularly emphasize the *promise* of pluralism, with shared values and coming together “on the common essentials of our two religions.” Yet pluralism, in practice, is far less formal and theological. As the Irish Interfaith group COISTINE has observed:

Muslims and Christians live on the same streets; use the same shops, buses and schools. Normal life means that we come into daily contact with each other. Dialogue, therefore, is not just something that takes place on an official or academic level only – it is part of daily life during which different cultural and religious groups interact with each other directly, and where tensions between them are the most tangible.¹

Those tensions, like religious diversity itself, are a fact: in this diverse and dynamic context, do we have the tools to engage with each other creatively and constructively? This is one of the questions that drives our work at the Pluralism Project, and led us to experiment with the case method. Our decision-based cases utilize the *problems* that arise in our multireligious society as our primary texts.

Fundamentally, a case is: “A scenario delineating a problem that requires an interactive response by the learner.” (Heitzmann, 2008, p. 523). At Harvard University, where we are based, it is widely used in professional schools: Harvard Law School taught with cases since 1870, shifting away from a lecture-based approach; the Business School now uses cases in 80% of their classes, and cases are regularly integrated into the curriculum at Harvard’s schools of Medicine, Education, and Government. (Garvin 2003) Yet the case method is rarely used in religious studies and theological education, whether at Harvard or elsewhere.

There is extensive educational research to support the use of the method, as our colleague Brendan Randall argues in his forthcoming dissertation. Cases facilitate active learning (Kunselman & Johnson, 2004) and collaborative learning (Olorunnisola, Ramasubramanian, Russill, & Dumas, 2003); they are effective in teaching critical thinking (Heitzmann, 2003, Kunselman & Johnson, 2004) and decision-making (Johnson, Bagdasarov, et al. 2012); they facilitate multiple perspective taking (McDade, 1995) and emotional and rational engagement (Kleinfeld, 1998).

As an active form of learning, the case method is also consonant with Diana Eck’s definition of pluralism:

¹ <http://www.coistine.ie/what-is-interreligious-dialogue>

Pluralism is not diversity alone, but *the energetic engagement with diversity*.
Pluralism is not just tolerance, but *the active seeking of understanding across lines of difference*

Pluralism is not relativism, but *the encounter of commitments*.

Pluralism is *based on dialogue*.²

The case method asks us to energetically engage with diverse points of view and seek greater understanding; through discussion, we are able not only to encounter the commitments of others, but to examine and refine our own points of view. Dialogical to its core, it requires us to listen carefully to another perspective – whether reading the text, considering the protagonist’s viewpoint, or participating in a case discussion. It is grounded in the real world, and understands conflict as generative. Our newest case, “A Call to Prayer,” explores one community divided over the broadcast of the call to prayer.

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.”³ 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.” Hamtramck 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

² Adapted from http://www.pluralism.org/pluralism/what_is_pluralism

³ All quotes from Karen Majewski: Karen Majewski, interview by Ellie Pierce, Hamtramck, Michigan, August 11, 2014.

immigrants came from Yemen, Bosnia, and Bangladesh in recent years. By 2004, nearly one third of Hamtramck's population was estimated to be Muslim⁴, 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.

What is at stake for Karen Majewski, and for the city of Hamtramck? If you were in her position, what would you do next? What opening comments would you make at the public hearing? Given the media interest in this issue, can you draft a press release that will help to avoid reducing the issue to a sound bite? What does she need to know about the call to prayer? How can she get this information? What is the content and meaning of the *adhan*? What strategies would you suggest for bridging the divide between those who oppose the

⁴ Tim Jones, "Islamic Prayer Call Stirs Tension," Chicago Tribune, April 21, 2004, accessed October 2014, http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2004-04-21/news/0404210290_1_immigrant-muslims-halal-meat-arabic.

call and those who support it? She appears to be supportive of the call to prayer being publically sounded: do you agree? Why or why not? Is there anything at risk by changing the noise ordinance to permit the call?

These are just a sampling of the many questions that grow out of the newest Pluralism Project case study, “A Call to Prayer.” Like all of our case studies, it is focused on a real-life dilemma, or a core problem. This excerpt also serves as a short version of the case, which can be used in community teaching contexts with limited preparation and discussion time. The longer “A” case,⁵ designed for colleges and classrooms, begins with the perspective of Karen Majewski, and then expands to describe the initial request to broadcast the prayer by Abdul Motlib, the contentious public hearings, the perspective of Robert Zwolak, who opposed the broadcast as “a matter of noise,” and the views of Rev. Sharon Buttry, who supported the call to prayer as an interfaith effort.

“A Call to Prayer” concludes as the matter goes to a public vote in Hamtramck, prompted by a petition from local residents. Before the “B” case reveals the results of the vote and the ramifications of the decision for the city of Hamtramck, there is ample space for discussion and analysis: What is at stake not just for Dr. Majewski, but also for Mr. Motlib, Mr. Zwolak, and Rev. Buttry? Discussion participants might be invited to role play one of the perspectives; or, they might be asked to write a letter to the editor of the local newspaper expressing their own view. Whether discussion participants support or oppose the call to prayer, they are asked to support their position: there is not one correct answer.

Participants might also be asked to read the excellent chapter on Hamtramck from Isaac Weiner’s book, *Religion Out Loud: Religious Sound, Space, and American Pluralism*, providing analysis of the issue that is, by design, not included in the case study. The case narrative poses a problem but does not offer analysis, or a solution. Through case discussion, participants are encouraged to inhabit diverse positions, to listen to other points of view, to discuss and disagree in a civil and constructive manner, and, finally, to articulate their own response in light of a more nuanced understanding of a complex problem.

Rather than affirming commonalities, and enshrining an ideal of the promise of pluralism in the abstract, the case method demands us to look directly at problems and ask: “What is at stake?” and “What would I do?” Whether Karen Majewski, or Padma Kuppa, told that, as a Hindu, she is not welcome to participate in her city’s Day of Prayer? Or Mayor Dean Koldenhoven, who learned that his city council has offered \$200,000 to a Muslim community to walk away from a real estate deal? Or Rabbi Sheldon Ezring, asked by a Jewish-born Zen priest if her family can become members at his Syracuse synagogue? (Or, for Shinge Roshi Sherry Chayat, if the Rabbi refuses her request to join?) The case method challenges us to think creatively, constructively, and self-critically about the real problems that confront us as members of a multireligious society, and provide an opportunity to practice pluralism.

⁵ *A Call to Prayer (A)*, <http://pluralism.org/files/cases/CallToPrayer.A.pdf>

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Since 2005, we have been experimenting with the case method at the Pluralism Project, and Diana Eck has taught a case studies course at Harvard since 2007. We continue to benefit from input from collaborative efforts with colleagues at a range of institutions, from the Harvard Business School to Auburn Seminary. In addition to writing cases, we have begun developing discussion guides: we recognize that one of the challenges of the case method is that it requires a new way of teaching, as it represents a significant departure from instructor-led lectures. We hope, in the future, to create workshops to train others to use cases in a range of community and classroom contexts. For more information about the Pluralism Project's Case Study Initiative, please see: <http://www.pluralism.org/casestudy>. To receive the "B" case of "A Call to Prayer" or to learn more, please contact epierce@fas.harvard.edu.

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