

Highland

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with trumpets or cannons! (the sounding of the shofar – ram’s horn – in the synagogue presents a less intrusive trumpeting call to community celebration).

On a cold January morning, Henry Thoreau noted in his journal that the Concord (Massachusetts) church bells sounded “particularly sweet.” But he sensed another religion calling: “[Townfolk] obey their call and go to the stove-warmed church, though God exhibits himself to the walker in a frosted bush today as much as in a burning one to Moses of old.”

This rings true for me as well. The natural world “calls out” to us – calls us out – to wild sanctuaries complete with choirs, scriptures, sermons – everything we expect under the belltowers inside the holy houses. As bells call Buddhists to mindful attention, nature’s resounding bells invite deeper contemplation and curiosity.

Living in California for decades, I passed historic mission churches all the time. They are quite beautiful buildings, each one with a bell in front or on top. When there was discussion about placing hundreds of bells across the state marking the way of the missions, I wrote a letter to the local paper: “Honoring history is important, but doesn’t it seem odd that one group gets honored above all others in the public



Bell tower in Seneca Falls, New York. CHRIS HIGHLAND/SPECIAL TO ASHEVILLE CITIZEN TIMES

square? Installing 555 mission bells across the state is rather alarming.” Ding.

Are we paying attention to the bird-calls and bells of nature’s congregation?

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