Between midnight and dawn, when the past is all deception,  
The future futureless, before the morning watch  
When time stops and time is never ending;  
And the ground swell, that is and was from the beginning,  
Clangs  
The bell.
AD 597

Colum Cille a thaghann ais ar Eilean I.
Columba dies on Iona.
DE SEÒRSA FUAIM A THA A’ TIGHINN À TÛR-CLUIG FALAMH?
WHAT IS THE SOUND OF AN EMPTY BELFRY CHIMING?

Alasdair Mac an Tòisich
Alastair McIntosh

Have you ever looked at churches in the Western Isles, and wondered why so many have a belfry but no bell? To understand why this is, we need to understand our history.

Living history is seldom a comfortable experience, but it is exciting, because it helps us to understand better where we’re coming from, where we’re at, and to reflect on where we might want to go. For me, that is the door that the Re-Soundings project has helped to open.

Before the invention of explosives or modern amplification, bells were the loudest sound that could easily be reproduced in a reliable and musical way. This made them the perfect instrument for creating a soundscape by which both space and time could be variously defined, claimed, imposed, or simply and joyously, celebrated. These, in ways that could be both secular and sacred.

Bells are closely associated with the creation of reality. In Hinduism and from ancient times, the ghanta, or temple bell, calls the soul back to the primal sound or vibration of creation - the Om or Aum. Its Christian equivalent might be the Logos or “Word” of God that sparks creation’s incarnation at the beginning of John’s gospel.

Physicists also speak about the creation using metaphors of sound. The universe, they say, began with Big Bang some fourteen billion years ago. One way in which it might all end is with a whimper – like the sound of a receding cosmic chime as the forces of “entropy”, or progressive disorder, cause everything slowly to run down.

Well, we’ll wait and see.

An ath thuras a chluinneas tu an t-salm Ghàidhlig, “Bibh sàmhach ‘s tuigibh gur mi Dia ...”, bidh mothachail gu bheil firinn nam facl a’ dol thairis air ciall nam facl fhèin. Mar a thuir Ann an t-Urr Aonghas Mac a’ Ghobhainn (an uair sin na mhinisteir aig Eaglais Shaor Chrois) ann an agallamh sna 1990an le Fiona NicDhòmhnall, “Anns a’ Ghàidhlig, ‘s ann a thhasas a’ cur na tha siud de notaichean–maise ris na salm is gu bheil a h-ùile duine a’ seinn fonn eadar-dhèaltaichte ach tha iad a’ tighinn cómhla is a’ cur gleans sònraichte riutha. Dhòmhsa dheth, tha e mar ... fuaimean nàdair uile a’ tighinn cómhla mar-aon.”

Anns a’ Bhioball, tha na tri salim mu dheireadh ag iarraidh oirnn Dia a mholadh nar n-aoradh ann an co-theagasg an t-saoghail nàdarrach air fad – maill ris a’ ghealaich, a’ ghrèin agus na reultan. Thathas a’ toirt oirnn seo a dheàamh le tiompan is ciomalaibh fonnmhor – an dà rud mar chluig air an déanamh rèidh.

Ann an Ecsodus 28, Dia ag órduchadh gun tèid fallainn a dhèanamh dha Aaron a aodach gorm is le cluig òir air a h-iomad, seo gus an, “clineach a fuaim, an uair a theòid e steach do’n ionad naomh an lathair an Tìghearn, agus an uair a thig e a-mach, a chum nach básaich e.”

Tha na cluig an seo a’ samhachadh a’ ghluaisaidh eadar naomhachd agus saoghaltaichd. Tha fuaim nan clag a’ fosgadh agus a’ dúnadh nan dorsan a-steach gu flor fhèin-fhiosrachadh. Tha iad ag àrdachadh an anama agus ga thoirt air ais chun na h-àbhaist nuair a thig an às thiginn às an t-saoghal dhraoidheachd.

Sound marked the onset of creation in the book of *Genesis* too. God said – “Let there be light” – and the rest is the unfolding of history. An 11th century Irish text, the *Lebor Gabhála Érenn* or *Book of Invasions* points us to the truth that Gaelic would have been the original language of Eden, with which, presumably, God spoke.

Next time you hear the Psalms being traditionally sung in Gaelic, “be still and know ...” Such sounds speak truths beyond the words alone. As the Rev Angus Smith (then of Cross Free Church) said in a 1990s interview with Fiona MacDonald: “In Gaelic you use so many grace notes and everybody can be slightly different but it all merges together into a kind of shimmer. And to me, it’s like ... all the sounds of nature merging into one.”

In the Bible, the last three Psalms of David invite us to glorify (and enjoy) God in praise with the whole of created nature – with the moon, the sun and other stars. We are urged so to do with tambourines and cymbals, both of which are flattened versions of bells.

In Exodus 28, God instructs that the priestly robe for Aaron should be made of blue fabric with golden bells around its hem. This, so “its sound shall be heard when he goes in unto the holy place before the Lord, and when he comes out, that he die not.”

Here, bells fulfil the shamanic function of signalling the transition between the secular and sacred. Their sound both opens and closes the gates of higher consciousness. It elevates the soul and then regrounds it back into normality when the time comes to step back out of ritual space.
At the juncture of the bronze and iron ages, a bell signalled considerable religious standing. They had the power both to bless and curse. A fine illustration of this comes from the threshold of the Druidic and the Christian eras in the Celtic world – our indigenous "old" and "new" testaments.

Buile Suibhne, as the medieval Irish manuscripts call the story, has been translated by Seamus Heaney as Sweeney Astray. On the eve of the Battle of Moira in 637, the bombastic west Scottish king, Sweeney, is awakened by a terrible clanging outside his stronghold.

There was Saint Ronan, swinging his bell to lay claim to territory on which to build his church.

There are many localisations of Ronan, but who knows? Perhaps this was the same version of the archetypal saintly figure as is remembered by the ruins of Teampall Rònain on the ridge above Teampall Mholuidh (Saint Moluag's Church) at Ness on Lewis. Perhaps the same one whose enigmatic cross was found on North Rona, or who gave his name to Saint Ronan's Bay on Iona and its nunnery church.

Even today, we tread on holy ground. As R.S. Thomas put it in his poem, The Moon in Lleyn: "These very seas/are baptized. The parish/has a saint's name time cannot/unfrock."

Not so, such immunity from unfrocking for our man, Sweeney! In the story he leapt out of bed in a terrible rage. His poor wife tried to grab his crimson coat in restraint, but it came away in his hands, and the warlord ran outside – stark naked.
Thilg e a chiad shaighead agus mhairbh e fear de dheisciobail Rónain. Chuimsich e an dara saighead air Rónan fhéin, ach bhual e air a chlag naomh aige gun docharn sam bith ga dheànamh air.

Thuirt Rónan ri Suibhne gum biodh a chlag, "mar mhollachd chun nan craobhan dha, is e mar iseann am meag gn an geag." Dheigh headh an truaghan na iseann is e a’ faibh a shbaid sa bhatail an ath là. Thurchair mar seo dha, a rèir an t-eadar-theangachaidh Bhurlaig aig Heaney:

His brain convulsed,
his mind split open.
Vertigo, hysteria, lurchings
and launchings came over him,
he staggered and flapped desperately,
he was revolted by the thought of known places
and dreamed of strange migrations ...
the weapons fell from his hands
and he levitated in a frantic cumbersome motion
like a bird of the air.
And Ronan’s curse was fulfilled.

Ged bu mollachd i, bha beannachd na cois. Chuir Suibhne seachad an corr dhe bheatha mar iseann, a’ deanamh bárdachd mu nàdar samhail nach fhacas a-rithist gus an do nochd bárdachd ùr ann an California sna 1960an.

Tha e a’ dol air spiris air Creag Ealasaid agus an Uamh Naomh Donnain air Eilean Eige. Tha e a’ cur a chùill ri fòirneart is ri Criostaidheachd fhuar le, “cluig eaglaisean a tha ri càrnran is bleith,” ach aig an aon âm ag ùrarnaigh ri Criosd – “Cuir am meag do mhileachd mi.” Tha anam a’ fàighinn fois tro Dhia is nàdar, flor agus fìadhach.

From lonely cliff-tops, the stag
bells and makes the whole glen shake
and re-echo. I am ravished.
Unearthly sweetness shakes my breast.

With the first throw of a spear he killed one of Ronan’s disciples. The second was aimed at the saint himself, but the weapon bounced harmlessly off his holy bell.

Ronan’s response was to tell Sweeney that his bell, “will curse you to the trees, bird-brain among the branches.” The hapless king would turn into a bird as he entered the following day’s battle. So it came to pass, that:

His brain convulsed,
his mind split open.
Vertigo, hysteria, lurchings
and launchings came over him,
he staggered and flapped desperately,
he was revolted by the thought of known places
and dreamed of strange migrations ...
the weapons fell from his hands
and he levitated in a frantic cumbersome motion
like a bird of the air.
And Ronan’s curse was fulfilled.

But here was curse as blessing in disguise. Sweeney goes on to live out his life as a bird, creating some of the finest poetry of deep ecology ever written until California started dreaming in the 1960s.

He roosts on Ailsa Craig and in Saint Donan’s cave on Eigg. He gives up the ways of violence. He spurns a cold churchianity with its “church bells that whinge and grind,” and yet, his prayer is to Christ – “Blend me forever in your sweetness.” His soul finds rest in God and nature, true and wild.

From lonely cliff-tops, the stag
bells and makes the whole glen shake
and re-echo. I am ravished.
Unearthly sweetness shakes my breast.

c.8th CENTURY
Cluig-laimhe aèisgnach larainn an an cmthachadh leis na Ceiltich.
Celtic forged iron quadrangular hand-dells.
c.9th Century

Doog-lenni teit agus uatha air an deasth in Ais. Scottish quadrangular cast bronze hand-ax.
Fast forward to the 16th century Reformation, and bells that "whinge and grind" were again an issue for protestors – or "Protestants" – who challenged what they saw as the corruption and excesses of the medieval Roman Catholic church.

Luther's co-worker, Philip Melanchthon, instructed priests that ringing bells for peace was "unnecessary and childish". The Reformation was, in part, an "acoustic Reformation". Rival factions battled to take control of the soundscape, and thereby imprint their authority.

While Catholics rang out bells to celebrate the saints and to ornament worship, their Protestant adversaries considered such practices to be "idolatrous", "vain and ostentatious" or plain "annoying".

For many of the reformers, bells were only permissible to signal the time, or to summon people to prayer and sermons, but not as a sacramental part of the worship.

Mind you, as the German campanologist (or bells scholar) Philip Hahn points out: in the Lutheran city of Ulm in 1617, five bells were swung to celebrate the "great pleasure" of the Reformation Jubilee. Actual Protestant practice varied greatly from place to place and from time to time.

Geneva was a battleground for ringing in the changes. In 1536 John Calvin was persuaded to settle there by his best friend, Guillaume (or William) Farel. Farel was a fiery practitioner of authoritarian religion. He stirred up mobs that went round Catholic churches, haranguing the priests and nuns, smashing icons, whitewashing religious paintings, and pulling down the bells.
Na Petite chronique (cunntas goirid) air na lăithean seo, tha an cailleach dhubh Poor Clare, tē Jeanne de Jussie (1503–1561), ag innse mu na thachair mas taimig iorre teicheadh à Sineubha tràth aon mhadainn an 1535. Le ionnsaighean gan toirt a’ mhanachainn, bhatha air a ghoid na chumadh na cailleachan beò. Bha na cailleachan air am maoidheadh, agus bha aca na éisteachd ri seanmon Farel a bha a’ feuchainn ri toirt orra pósadh a dhéanamh ri fior fhireannaich Phròstanach.

Tha an taisbeanadh Re-Soundings a’ fosgladh an Steòrnabhagh air 12mh Cèitean. Sgiobh Jeanne de Jussie mun aon lā an Sineubha an 1535 mar a leanas:

... those dogs removed the bell from Notre Dame de Grace and threw it down from the steeple to destroy it. It was said that several of them struck it as hard as they could with stones and hammers, but they could not damage it. Afterward they went to see the bells at the monastery of Palais and at the parish of Saint-Gervais because they wanted to melt them down and make weapons to use against monseigneur and the Christians. Every day they caused some new scandal.

Bhiodh an t-aon seorsa milleadh ga dheanadh air feadadh cinn a tuath na h-Éorpa, agus air feadh Bhreatain. Gheibh sinn tuigse nas fheàrr air an dith chlag ann an eaglaisean nan Ellean tro smaoineachadh air an fhóirneart seo; fóirneart air a dhéanamh leis an dà chuid Caitligich agus Pròstanach.

Mar fhior samhla a’ cur an-aghaidh na h-eachdraidh de dh’fhóirneart, tha Màiri Killin agus Úistean Watt, an luch-ealain air cùl a’ phróiseict, air cluig a chruthachadh às sligean-urchrach bhon Chiad Chogadh.

In her Short Chronicle, a diary of those iconoclastic days, a Poor Clare nun, Jeanne de Jussie (1503–1561), describes the events that led to her order having to flee Geneva early one morning in 1535. Their convent had been progressively robbed of all its means of sustenance. The sisters were repeatedly threatened, and subjected to forced sermonising by Farel who wanted to marry them off to good Protestant husbands.

May 12th marks the opening of the Re-Soundings exhibition in Stornoway. Of that day in Geneva, 1535, Sister Jeanne recorded:

... those dogs removed the bell from Notre Dame de Grace and threw it down from the steeple to destroy it. It was said that several of them struck it as hard as they could with stones and hammers, but they could not damage it. Afterward they went to see the bells at the monastery of Palais and at the parish of Saint-Gervais because they wanted to melt them down and make weapons to use against monseigneur and the Christians. Every day they caused some new scandal.

Similar iconoclasm was to take place across northern Europe, including the British Isles. One way to understand our Hebridean empty belfries is therefore as a throwback to the violent religion of violent men of violent times. The violence was from both sides of the sectarian divide.

In a powerful symbolic reversal of making bells, Mhairi Killin and Hugh Watt, the artists behind the Re-Soundings project, have taken shells from the First World War and cast them back into bells.
To me, our empty belfries are a reminder of the imperative to move beyond religious violence from whatever quarter. We must lift our eyes to a future where, “Those days are past now and in the past they must remain.”

But I see something of even greater spiritual depth encoded in the empty belfry. Theologians often distinguish two types of religion – the cataphatic and the apophatic.

The former speaks in positive statements about the divine while the latter speaks in the negative. Cataphatic religion might shout out that “God is love” and chime it out with bells and smells. In contrast, apophatic religion – you’ve got it – is the austere simplicity and understatement of our Hebridean Presbyterianism, and equally of paths like eastern Zen.

Both paths can be valid ways to God, and both can interweave to answer different spiritual needs.

Zen masters sometimes use kōans, or spiritual teaching riddles. They’ll ask crazy questions, meant to trip the mind off its ever-so-logical tramlines and into the realm of mystery, like: “What is the sound of one hand clapping?”

I find myself looking up at our island’s empty belfries, looking straight through them – seeing the moon, and sun, and other stars – and posing my own kōan.

What is the sound of an empty belfry chiming?

Back rings the cosmic answer.

God sounds from the Belfry of Creation.

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Dealbhian an fholliseachaidh: Teampall Eòin, Teampall nan Crò Naomh, Teampall Mholuaidh, Eìleòn Leòdhais © Àrainneachd Eochdraidheil na h-Alba.
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Luther attends school in Magdeburg.