

Sacred sounds and community conflicts

By [Isaac Weiner](#)

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The Times of Israel [reported](#) in early March on a controversy involving Jewish residents of East Jerusalem who were upset about how loudly a nearby mosque was broadcasting the *adhan*, or Islamic call to prayer. Amidst all of the problems confronting Israeli and Palestinian society, one might be forgiven for having missed this story. It was only a dispute about noise, after all.

Yet this incident was hardly an isolated event. Call-to-prayer disputes have erupted in numerous European and U.S. cities over the last decade. In many cases, municipal authorities have even required mosque developers to agree never to broadcast the call publicly as a condition for obtaining necessary building permits.

U.S. Muslims, for their part, have divided over the question of whether mosques should even want to broadcast the *adhan*. Critics suggest that the practice no longer makes sense when many of a mosque's neighbors are not Muslim and when *adhan* apps are readily available on smartphones. One Muslim activist even told me that he thought it was "crazy" for anyone to make an issue out of this, given all of the "real" problems facing American Muslims. "It's not a critically important aspect of our faith," he said. "We've got enough problems. So why bring them unnecessarily?"

Defenders of the practice, meanwhile, have argued that Muslims' minority status in the U.S. makes it all the more critical for them to insist on their right to make themselves heard. In addition to fulfilling a prescribed ritual function, publicly broadcasting the *adhan* can help to make space for Muslims in society, proclaiming their equal status with U.S. Christians, whose churches have long enjoyed a right to ring bells.

And yet it was not so long ago that U.S. Christians were engaged in a similar debate about the propriety of ringing church bells. In the latter part of the 19th century, churches' right to ring bells was called into question. In cities transformed by industrialization and immigration, many Americans began to hear church bells differently, describing their hallowed chimes as mere noise. In one notable case,

wealthy residents of Philadelphia's Rittenhouse Square neighborhood even persuaded a city court to silence the bells at a Protestant Episcopal church.

Critics described church bells as unnecessary relics, whose racket served only to give churches a bad name. "I should regard it as highly injurious to the Christian religion," an Episcopal Divinity School professor wrote in 1878, "if it should come to be *associated* with the greatest discomfort and nuisance of our daily civil life." Far better, he suggested, for churches to exert influence on modern society by keeping quiet, by offering a kind of sonic sanctuary or aural reprieve from the clamor of the industrial city, by modeling the virtues of respect and forbearance, rather than insisting on their right to be heard.

For their part, the bells' defenders interpreted the complaints as attacks on Christianity and Christian authority more generally. "The chief instigators of the hue and cry that the church bell must go," one pastor insisted in 1875, were "atheistical iconoclasts, who would be delighted to have not only the bell ringing stopped, but the very foundations of the churches razed." An 1882 *New York Times* editorial agreed, sarcastically noting, "It is trying to them to be reminded that there are those who believe in Christianity, and that the Christian religion still maintains a foothold in this City." For these advocates, bells proclaimed Christianity's continued vitality amid the secularizing forces of modern urban life, to call out alongside the whistle of the factory, thereby ensuring that city dwellers would not only be called to labor, but to pray.

In this way, much like call-to-prayer disputes today, 19th-century debates about church bells were never just about noise. The "bells question," as newspapers at the time described it, raised critical issues about how American Christians would adapt their religious practices to the demands of changing historical and social contexts. It challenged them to consider not only whether Protestant Christianity would maintain a robust public presence in the modern world, but how it would do so, whether to imagine their faith as fully integrated into the life of the city or as set apart. In their different responses to church bells, they articulated competing conceptions of Christianity itself.

The *Philadelphia Inquirer*, commenting on the Rittenhouse Square lawsuit in 1877, noted "that if religion consists in the ringing of bells then the Vestry was right in replying as [it did]; but, if religion consists in gentleness, in courtesy, in respect for the feelings of others, in a gracious following of the spirit of those lessons of charity

taught by the Savior of Men, then the reply of the Vestry was about as wrong as it could well be." Herein lies a critical question about religion's true essence that remains unresolved, one that continues to challenge American Christians, Muslims, and others, calling out to them for response.

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