

London's mega-mosque

## The crescent and the very cross

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### Why plans for a giant new mosque have upset Christians—and Muslims

Infographics

Megaflocks		
Largest religious venues		
Denomination	Location	Capacity
Islam	Abbeymills mosque, West Ham, London*	12,000
	Baitul Futuh mosque, Morden, Surrey	10,000
Independent Christian	Kingsway ICC, Hackney, London	4,000
Sikh	Sri Guru Singh Sabha Gurdwara, Southall, Middlesex	3,000
Church of England	St Paul's Cathedral, Central London	2,500
Roman Catholic	Metropolitan Cathedral of Christ the King, Liverpool	2,500
Jehovah's Witnesses	East of the Pennines Assembly Hall, Rotherham, South Yorkshire	2,100
Jewish	Edgware United Synagogue, Middlesex	1,500
Hindu	Shri Venkateswara Temple, Tivodale, West Midlands	1,200
Scientology	St Hill Manor, East Grinstead, West Sussex	1,000
Buddhist	Rigpa, Central London	230

Source: Respective organisations \*Not yet built

A FEAST of religiously-inspired architecture awaits visitors to Britain. Lovers can swap sweet nothings in the “whispering gallery” of St Paul's Cathedral. Among the ruins of Kirkstall Abbey, actors perform Shakespeare *al fresco*. Most postcards sent home from Cambridge feature the colossal gothic chapel of King's College, the unofficial symbol of the university.

These mighty Christian edifices are increasingly eclipsed by the buildings of less familiar faiths (see chart). The Shri Venkateswara Hindu temple in the West Midlands claims to be Europe's largest, and Surrey's towering Baitul Futuh mosque makes a similar boast within Islam. In west London Sri Guru Singh Sabha says it is the biggest Sikh *gurdwara* outside India. Even the largest Christian churches are now independent outfits that have nothing to do with the Church of England.

Despite such diversity, plans for a huge new mosque in Newham, east London, have raised an unholy fuss. The Abbey Mills mosque would hold 12,000 worshippers and a school, making it Britain's largest religious building and almost five times the size of St Paul's. If it is built, as planned, next to the Olympic park, the mosque would greet the world when it arrives in 2012. London's multicultural mayor, Ken Livingstone, is in raptures; less happy are the 281,685 who signed a petition calling for the "mega-mosque" to be banned. A formal planning request is due next year, and the final say is likely to be with the communities secretary, Hazel Blears.

Some cry favouritism. Just as architects' drawings of the mosque emerged, Britain's largest church, the Kingsway International Christian Centre in nearby Hackney, was told it would have to make way for the Olympic village. This week the church packed its bags for an uncertain future (though a fat compensatory cheque is in the post). Opposition has also come from some local Muslims, 2,500 of whom signed a petition against the mosque—probably because of the ethnic and theological rivalries among Newham's south Asian, Arab and African residents.

As with anything involving Muslims these days, the matter is also seen through the prism of terrorism. In 2003 police raided London's big Finsbury Park mosque, and found weapons and fake passports. One of its preachers, Abu Hamza, was later jailed for inciting murder and racial hatred. Some suggest that Abbey Mills could be used in the same way. In reality, skulduggery is probably easier to monitor in a mega-mosque than in a backstreet outfit. But someone in the police is worried: a police report on extremism in mosques found its way into the *Times* on September 7th—oddly, the day of the first public meeting on the Abbey Mills project.

Attention has focused on Tablighi Jamaat, the 80-year-old Muslim movement that proposed the mosque and says it can raise the £70m or so needed to build it. Most do not consider the group extremist. "While in the movement they are not supposed to have any political activity," says Marc Gaborieau of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique in Paris—though he adds that some dissatisfied followers go on to more politicised groups.

Alan Craig, the Newham councillor who has led opposition to the mosque, plays down fears of terrorism but criticises the group's "them and us" attitude. "If a Christian church was preaching the same thing [isolationism], I would be against that too," he says. One local Muslim organiser agrees. "They're not radical at all. It's impossible to get them to vote, become school governors, or anything." There is endless panic about political Islam. Is apolitical Islam much better?