

Battle of the True Faiths

It's Islam vs. Christianity at Ye Olde Speakers Corner

BY SÁRAH SENNOTT

JAY SMITH IS A CHRISTIAN ON a mission, and he has the scars to prove it. Earlier this year, he says, two Muslim men attacked him in London's Hyde Park, nearly throttling him. A couple of years ago he was beaten up at the same spot. Yet every Sunday, as he has for the past decade, he picks up his Bible and heads back to Speakers Corner, London's famous outpost of free speech and protest. With a master's degree in Islamic studies and an evangelical gleam in his eye, Smith doesn't have much good to say about



RILED UP: Debating religion in public puts preachers at risk

Islam. But no one disputes his right to mount a soapbox and shout out his opinions—except, perhaps, a few of the Muslims he regularly offends. They rough him up from time to time, he says, “to get me to shut up.”

Welcome to Speakers Corner, a new battleground in the struggle between militant Islam and evangelical Christianity. Each Sunday morning Christians and Muslims gather there to debate, preach, proselytize and, increasingly, fight. Usually the exchanges are merely rhetorical, however heated. Bibles and Qur'ans, their pages worn from intense scrutiny, are shaken in the air. The corner's traditional

mélange of Marxists, Buddhists, professional cranks and tourists is there, too. But make no mistake: seasoned goers say tensions have never been higher. “This is a war zone,” says Steve Same, 40, a missionary from Florida who's been coming to Speakers Corner for years.

Speakers Corner is no stranger to controversy. It was, after all, established in an act of Parliament in 1872, after a series of riots in the mid-1800s. Karl Marx's speeches there during the late 19th century provoked intense debate, if not blows. Several times over the past century the place has been shut down because of crowd violence. “That's what Speakers Corner is all about,” says Abdurraheem Green, a 39-year-old British Muslim who's become a habitué. The Metropolitan Police downplay the passions on display these days. But on one recent Sunday, half a dozen constables were patrolling the area that measures about a quarter of the size of a football field.

Provocation seems to be the game, especially among Smith's group. “It's about time we go on the attack,” says Smith. Each week before heading to Speakers

Corner, he holds a workshop for evangelical Christians, mainly youths from America. Smith says he trains the group to heckle Muslim speakers, strategically placing one on each side of the speaker and loudly demanding that any time the Bible is referenced, it's to be read in context. Smith's recruits also recite in English highly selective passages of the Qur'an—for instance, one that justifies men beating their wives.

Such tactics understandably anger Muslims. “They come here with an

agenda—attack, attack, attack,” says Abu Yassin, a 65-year-old from Kurdistan. “We just come to teach about Islam.” Muslim hecklers are no less ardent than Smith's group, even if they appear to be less organized. Too often the two sides seem merely to be talking—loudly—past one another. Yet here and there, genuine meetings of the mind take place. A Muslim sheik tells a young American how suicide bombings are not condoned under Islam. A Christian woman speaks of women's rights with a Muslim girl. The question is whether such reasonable voices can be heard over the din of the crowds. ■

notes he struck went far in reassuring Poles. “Today we bow in shame,” Schröder told his listeners, adding that Germans “know very well who started the war and who its first victims were.” Then he categorically ruled out any restitution claims “that would stand history on its head.” No less symbolically, the new German president, Horst Köhler, last month picked Warsaw, rather than traditional Paris, for his first official visit abroad. Even a few months ago that clarity would have been welcomed—but not hailed as big news. It's a measure of the moment that both Poles and Germans must be reminded of how important it is not to hold their future hostage to the past.

The trajectory of that future is plain, if not always clearly seen. Just three months into the EU, and truck traffic across the newly open Polish-German border has doubled, according to German highway authorities. That will mean another surge in the two nations' rapidly rising trade, already €32 billion in 2003. More than 8,000 German companies have operations in Poland, but now investment is starting to flow the other way. Last year Warsaw-based energy conglomerate PKN Orlen made corporate Poland's biggest acquisition abroad to date, buying 500 German gas stations for €101 million. Says Orlen Deutschland director Michal Jonczynski, “This is only the start.”

Less quantifiable ties have also grown. German and Polish border guards share duty on the EU's new eastern frontier; soldiers train together in a joint military corps. Without help from an army of Polish maids, fruit pickers, nannies and maids—most working illegally until labor restrictions phase out in a few years—the German service sector would grind to a halt. These immigrants, in turn, fuel Polish growth with the checks they send back home. True, talk to ordinary Germans, and Poland remains a blank spot on their map. Two thirds have never visited Poland, and indeed wouldn't dream of doing so. A survey by Geo magazine last week showed Poland, among Germany's nine neighbors, to be the place they disliked most. That said, German tourism is showing signs of picking up. For every German expellee hoping to recover his lost estates, there are a dozen going back to help the new (Polish) owners fix them up.

Flaps over the past will no doubt make headlines for years to come, rattling nationalistic chains and raising old ghosts. Still, it's a new era for both Germans and Poles. History will always be baggage that the two nations will carry along their common road. But the good news is that, slowly, it will grow lighter. ■