1. YOUTH WORK AND ISLAM – A GROWING TRADITION

Dr Brian Belton was born and brought up in Newham and is a Senior Lecturer at YMCA George Williams College in East London. He has nearly 40 years experience in youth work; as a field worker and an academic he has experience in Africa, Canada, the USA, Iceland, Sweden, Greece, China, the Falkland Islands and Eastern Europe. He has recently been involved in the professionalization of youth work in Malaysia and across south-east Asia. However, his practice and personal roots are in London’s East End communities, which of course has included Muslim contexts. Recently Brian took a lead in developing a pre-graduate course at the George Williams College for youth workers involved in Islamic contexts, looking to lay a path for this group to enter undergraduate studies. He has written close to 50 books looking at identity, social history, race, ethnicity and sport.

INTRODUCTION

The Prophet said, 'He is not of us who does not have mercy on young children'

Al-Tirmidhi Hadith

The following seeks to generate a sense of the development of youth work with young Muslims in North and East London over the last 40 years via autobiographical and narrative research, but also to demonstrate something of how an awareness of Islam can enrich and enliven practice. It includes analysis of the life-stories of Muslims who grew up in the area, their encounters with youth provision and how they moved on to become youth workers. I believe their contribution exemplifies the influence of Muslims in youth work over the years, but also shows the relevance of Islam to the field in the contemporary period.

Overall, this chapter looks to draw attention to the relatively long history of the relationship Muslims have had with youth work provision in these areas of London and generate an analysis of the impact this has had on those concerned. This is achieved by highlighting how Islam has influenced the sphere of practice of particular workers and the way in which insights drawn from Islamic teachings and ways of
‘being’ can inform contemporary practice on a generic basis, while often proving more relevant and appropriate than some of the deficit oriented philosophy/theory that can be found in the literature surrounding the practice of informal education and youth work.

I should say at the outset that I am not, by any stretch of imagination or metaphor and scholar of Islam. My Arabic is as limited as the reader’s imagination might allow and mostly self-taught with the aid of one or two more learned, more linguistically aware friends. For these shortcomings I apologise in advance, but my first hope is that you can hear what I have to say in the spirit of Islamic theory of knowledge. This said, I have been involved in youth work for the best part of 40 years, much of this working alongside Muslim colleagues and with Muslim clients. My second hope is that this will be seen worthy enough to serve as a foundation of my position.

MUSLIMS AND YOUTH WORK

Any attempt to portray the general experience of an eclectic population such as Muslims feels bound to fail to do very much more than generate vague stereotypes in order to produce an image that has no real use and even less authenticity.

There is no ‘one type’ of Muslim. Most people know of that there are Sunni and Shia Muslims. However, just looking at Sunni Islam, within that grouping there are different schools of law and belief (Ash'ari, Maturidi, Murji'ah, Mu'tazili, Athari and Zahiri). Within Shia there are the Zaidiyyah, Alaw and Alevi).

However, Islam also encompasses Kharijite Islam, Sufism and Ahmadiyya Muslims, as well as Liberal, Qur’aniyyoon and Heterodox groups, such as Mahdavism, Moorish Science, Nation of Islam, Submitters, Druze and Ahl-e Haqq. Added to this are different cultural, national, tribal/clan, district, regional and even familial interpretations, understandings (and misunderstandings), translations, traditions, habits and customs. Many understand Islam to be united in the Arabic language, but Arab dialects can be almost languages in themselves and it can’t be taken that a rural Bangladeshi farmer will understand the Arabic used by a middle-class Egyptian.

As might be predicted, not everyone within this diverse mixture of people will agree that all those included above are ‘real’ Muslims.

For all this, for most of its history the investigation of faith based youth work has ignored the participation and contribution of individual Muslims and the general influence of Islam. In saying this I invite, probably understandably, defensive responses; I have experienced some of the same over the last few years, both from Muslims and non-Muslims. These include variations of:

− ‘Muslims haven’t played much of a part in faith based youth work until relatively recently’
− ‘There is no mainstream Islamic youth work’