6. MAPPING YOUTH WORK WITH MUSLIMS IN BRITAIN

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In recent times the ‘identity’, loyalty and affiliations of young British Muslims have come under relentless scrutiny, whereby as a group they have been inadvertently homogenised and pathologised for the very real challenges and problems they deal with. As young individuals, many young British Muslims report a sense that mainstream civic and community engagement with them only occurs in the context of their being viewed as a problem, demanding unprecedented remedial measures and interventions, or as a ‘high risk’ group that requires constant management – not as respected individual stakeholders who have much to contribute and offer to wider society.

Akeela Ahmed, Chief Executive, Muslim Youth Helpline (2010)

INTRODUCTION

Currently, young people from the British Muslim communities are subjected to an array of corrosive stereotypes. Young males are often demonised as being either sociopaths, engaged in criminality or ripe for religious extremism, while young women are frequently portrayed as victims of religious patriarchy. These well rehearsed tropes, given episodic currency among certain media outlets, mask the more complex lived realities of British Muslim communities at the receiving end of grinding social disadvantage. The excessive focus on issue of violent radicalisation obscures the more mundane challenges Muslim youth share with their non-Muslim peers. In addition to struggling against social exclusion and...
religious discrimination, most Muslim youth are actually preoccupied with very adolescent concerns about ‘fitting in’, relationships (Younis, 2010), identity exploration and generally trying to succeed in life. This is made more difficult by the ongoing attacks on multiculturalism, a proxy for the rejection of the visible Muslim presence (Fekete, 2009) stigmatised for their alleged inability to integrate into secular British life. This chapter provides an overview of the types of youth work carried out with Muslim youth in the midst of these challenges. It begins by contextualising youth religiosity, then proceeds to map some of the main approaches to engaging young people in their communities over the last thirty years and evaluates the conceptual frameworks and methodologies used. It goes on to argue the need for faith sensitive youth work, provides a delineation of the contours of a professional Muslim youth work model and concludes with a summary of the anticipated challenges ahead for this nascent field.

**YOUNG PEOPLE AND RELIGIOUS REFORMISM**

From the end of the 1980s to the early 21st Century, British Muslims have become much more of a visible minority, most notably in the aftermath of international crises such as the Rushdie Affair, aftermath of the Gulf War, conflict in Bosnia, terrorist attacks in New York, London and the ongoing rise in Islamophobic sentiment in Western societies. Changing demographics, social marginalisation and the work of religious revivalist groups have all contributed to increasing religiosity among British Muslim youth (Samad, 2004, Mondal, 2009, Gilliant-Ray, 2010). However, it is important to note the vast majority remain ‘cultural Muslims,’ that is to say people who describe themselves as not practising their faith in a regular, committed way. This group represents between 75 to 80 percent of Muslim communities in Western societies (Ramadan, 2010). The remaining 20 percent or so maybe involved in some form of structured religious activism and within that a smaller percentage, dedicated to religious activism. This diversity of Muslims attitudes towards their faith cannot be overstated as it is possible to observe the emergence of various Muslim youth subcultural trends in the ‘non-practising Muslim’ segments of communities. Youth who identify themselves as ‘Rude Boys’ members of the ‘Asian Gang’, ‘Gay Muslims’ (http://gaymuslims.org/, fashion conscious ‘Muhajababes’ (Allegra, 2006), ‘Heavy Metal Muslims’ (Levine, 2007) and even ex-Muslims (http://www.ex-muslim.org.uk/indexEvents.html), negotiate their identities in creative ways.

Preceding these developments, most Muslim children, acquire their religious identities in their formative years when,

...the teachings of Islam are narrated, remembered and practised...consciously and consciously learn traditions and observances, thereby developing a Muslim *moral habitus* (Winchester, 2008).

Religious identities are inculcated with varying degrees of success at an early age through familial space, peer group contact and by attendance of after school...