

Responding to Lives not Events

M G Khan

It can be argued that every national trauma leaves a legacy that goes on to shape policy. The mass unemployment of the 1980s, for example, was determinant in this Labour Government's focus on getting young people on the learning or training ladder and of its emphasis on lifelong learning.

Where community (particularly Black and Minority Ethnic community) responses have emerged, they have often been determined by such events – Scarman, McPherson, Cattle are all cases in point. Devising strategies and responses to communities on the basis of 7/7 or some civil unrest can be compromised by political imperatives taking precedent over practical necessities. Yet it is these very practical necessities that need to be identified in order to fulfill the aim of developing organisational capacity that takes full account of the frequently 'messy' reality of people's lives. Seldom does one encounter young people and adults who attribute their braving a particular crisis to support from their community or the masjid; when people's lives explode, those around dive for shelter from the fall out.

Dialogue with representatives of Muslim communities appeals to local authorities and national government; it offers them a convenient and cost effective shortcut. Funding a representative organisation is, after all, simpler than embarking upon a critique of statutory and voluntary provision or investing in complex infrastructures. But in consequence emerging organisations are sidelined from funding and development opportunities and further marginalised and cut off from a mainstream ever more ideologically, financially and theoretically committed. And so the opportunity to develop the capacity and the variety of the organisational field, to more diversely and plurally connect individuals to communities and communities with each other, is lost. In Britain mediation between communities and Government is predicated on organisational presence and this by and large has been the preserve of the middle classes and at the service of middle class interests. Historically this too has compounded marginalization, and the role of class in the Muslim community is no exception.

In the area of youth work one need only look at the range and number of agencies and networks that sustain youth work or services for children – universities, academic journals, and magazines, local authorities, and a range of national and local, faith based and voluntary organisations such as Barnados and the Scouts, and national and local youth forums - to realize the paucity of the Muslim organisational sphere. What Muslim organisations do exist are stretched to breaking point just in dealing with the number of Government departments that need to be negotiated with let alone deliver on all the agendas they are faced with. Perversely, the politics of representation often means that we end up claiming too much without the capacity, expertise or the infrastructure to deliver.

By comparison, the Church claims to have more youth workers than the statutory sector, and the current Bishop of London holds the Chair of the National Youth Agency. And the number of national Jewish youth work organizations stands at nineteen.

Curiously, all these organizations are able to sustain funding relationships and dialogue with Government and its agencies having neither to present nor claim the “one voice” seemingly expected from Muslims.

While religious identity is seen as a private or latent issue for young people in general, this is not the case for young Muslims, who not only live out the introspective development of their dīn (religion) under the impact of headline Islam but whose religious identity is the obsessive object of suspicion, surveillance, polls, surveys and interrogation. Youth work is particularly prone to internalising Islamophobic motifs embedded in a discourse of securing and protecting values, principles and cultural rights. And all the more so because values and principles lie at its foundation and the idealist intentions and the desire to ‘make a difference’ and ‘be of service’ which are precisely what attract practitioners, risk making missionaries of us all.

Muslim identity has increasingly become a positive and yet a very painful terrain for Muslim youth to negotiate. Youth work in general remains suspicious of confessional approaches that create little space for a critical relationship between the young person, their religion, society etc. In the case of Muslim youth work, there is a specific need on the part of youth workers to comfort and reassure young people, and shore up their identities in the face of sustained hostility. However, this support process can be viewed as indoctrination, manipulation of funding or worse by the outside world.

The subtle dichotomies involved in developing work with young people and the issues and realities that affect their lives are revealed in its practice. These are key insights that can inform organisational aims, forms, structures and locations. It is imperative to channel efforts into responding to the specificities and complexities of young Muslims’ lives rather than to events that flatten this complexity and suggest that it is amenable to short term regulatory interventions.