Youth Work and Islam
A Leap of Faith for Young People

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Youth Work and Islam provides an eclectic focus, reflecting its dual inspirations of its title. It considers how youth work can be informed by Islam but at the same time looks at how practice can be pertinent to young Muslims, their community and relationship with wider society.

In this book, Sadek Hamid and Brian Belton bring together a range of thinkers and practitioners who exemplify and analyse this situation. This not only produces much more than a straightforward view of informed practice, it also presents a broad and humane understanding of the character and possibilities of youth work over a broad perspective. Centrally, while the work demonstrates how Islam and Muslims have contributed to the development of youth work, it also puts forward ideas and standpoints that demonstrate how Islam can continue to inform practice, add to its humanitarian ethos and even make our work with young people in general more effective.

As such, Youth Work and Islam is an essential part of any youth worker’s reading, working within and beyond Muslim contexts. It is also a useful and readable text for social workers, teachers, police officers, clerics, medical professionals and anyone wanting a more informed understanding of how faith perspectives can inform and refresh attitudes, approaches and enhance work with individuals, groups and communities.
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This book has an eclectic focus, emanating from the duel inspirations presented by its title. Through the perspective and voice of practitioners, it considers how youth work can be informed by Islam, but at the same time looks to demonstrate how practice can be pertinent to young Muslims, their community and relationship with wider society. But more broadly it also does something to demonstrate how an understanding of Islam can enhance and develop youth work practice across the horizon of the discipline, providing a much needed impetus to theory and ideas, many of which have ceased to be relevant or are coming close to being passed their sell by date.

This ground breaking collection has, for the first time, brought together a range of voices and views to elaborate and celebrate the relationship between young British Muslims, Islam and youth work. By creating a discursive space to inform, debate and share experiences, it is hoped, that this volume will be of interest to professional and voluntary youth workers, policy makers and anyone with a stake in the welfare of Muslim youth. By creating a discursive space to inform, debate and share experiences, it is hoped, that this volume will be of interest to professional and voluntary youth workers, policy makers and anyone with a stake in the welfare of Muslim youth. As a whole, the book questions the bifurcation usually proposed (or proclaimed) by the media, and that is sometimes implied in policy, which purports that the imagined homogenous Muslim population and the rest of society (apparently taken to be anything but the heterogeneous conglomeration that it is) are separate and often divergent entities. Moreover it challenges the myth that young Muslims (and perhaps the young generally) are a kind of sub-species within this dichotomic fantasy.

The chapters that follow are timely as, particularly in the European context, Muslims are being effectively ostracised for being who they are, in a way that would be deemed as unacceptable from any civilised or liberal standpoint. Under the diaphanous camouflage of the weakening of ‘collective identity’, in Munich, on February 2011, as the English Defence League, which has been accused of Islamophobia, being understood by many to disgorge a clearly anti-Muslim vocabulary as the spine of their organisational logic, held a mass rally in Luton, British Tory Prime Minister, David Cameron told the world in a speech, which ostensibly focused on terrorism (mentioning the words ‘Muslim’ or ‘Islam’ 36 times and ‘extremism/ist’ 23 times);

In our communities, groups and organisations led by young, dynamic leaders promote separatism by encouraging Muslims to define themselves solely in terms of their religion.

He went on to declare;

...organisations that seek to present themselves as a gateway to the Muslim community are showered with public money despite doing little to combat extremism
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This qualifies as a gross and flagrant misrepresentation of the vast majority of young Muslims and of Muslim organisations; many of the latter receive no public funding whatsoever.

But even worse than this, the tenor and ethos of the this speech marks out Muslims, and particularly young Muslims, as a dangerous threat to European populations;

...this threat comes in Europe overwhelmingly from young men who follow a completely perverse, warped interpretation of Islam... young men find it hard to identify with the traditional Islam practiced at home by their parents, whose customs can seem staid when transplanted to modern Western countries

This kind of rhetoric, at a time of economic recession, smacks of the language of pogrom, and echoes Cameron’s Tory predecessor Enoch Powell’s 1968 warning (also a period of recession) of ‘Rivers of Blood’ that served as a shot in the arm for the National Front, an earlier incarnation of British National Party.

In the face of this type of insensitive, undistinguished, hurtful and apparently purposely divisive onslaught (not even the most foolish Politian, which Cameron is not, could believe this type drum beating would not have the power to fuel the fires of hatred) of all professionals, youth workers, as long-time self proclaimed ‘advocates of young people’ need to make a response.

Perhaps the most authoritative rejoinder to such decided hyperbolic anamorphosis is to demonstrate how Islam and Muslims have augmented, and continue to contribute, inform, increase the integrity of and refresh valuable work, which potentially and actually impacts on all young people. In this cause, Youth Work and Islam brings together Muslim and non-Muslim youth practitioners and academics in a project that demonstrates how Islamic understanding and the presence of Muslim youth workers has enhanced and continues to enrich British culture and the life of young people of this country, promoting a fairer, more just and humane society. However, perhaps contrary to the distorted pastiche of Islam that has become popularised in the European context, what the reader will be left with on engagement with this book is the vigour Islam offers to encourage dialogue and so questioning. It is this which can give rise to action and ideas that are able generate an ethos that might be the closest we can come to experiencing democracy, not just as a word but as a field effect. This provides a means to connect and meld a nation, which is being systematically and violently broken up into distinct human categories, into a functioning society, that can be energised by its rich diversity.

Youth work arises out of the society that fosters it, while playing a part in maintaining and creating that society. As such, youth work, influenced by Islam or effecting young Muslims, shapes and is shaped by the same. However, the product and process of this symbiosis is hardly understood because it has more or less remained unexamined. Indeed, most of the time and energy given to considering the actual or potential relationship between Islam and youth work tends to see one
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element (Islam) as a target of the other (youth work). Anyone who has any understanding of either Islam or youth work will, with consideration, recognise this to be at least unrealistic and perhaps a ridiculous point of view. Even if it seems to make sense on paper, in practice the delivery of youth work hardly ever achieves the kind of cultural hygiene that policy makers might wish for. At its best youth work tends to melt into its context and become at one with it. As a secondary effect, particular incarnations of practice have a propensity to bleed into the whole, reforming the general nature of the field (youth work is a field and not a discipline – its plasticity and tendency to metamorphose dictates this).

This understanding guides the purpose of what follows; youth work and Islam are not approached as separate considerations affecting or infecting each other; we do not want to put youth work into Islam, nor veneer youth work with Islam; we see youth work and Islam as complimentary in terms of a values, hopes and ambitions. This is something more than fabricating a notion of complementary systems of thinking and acting, it is effectively the pointing out, for what the most part has historically been, a hidden seam of precious synchronicity; a synthesis of ethics, attitudes and ways of being.

This approach produces much more than a straightforward view of theologically informed practice, it presents a broad and humane understanding of the character and possibilities of youth work practice. Centrally, while, taken as a whole, the book demonstrates how Islam and Muslims have been and are part of the development of youth work, it also puts forward ideas and standpoints that demonstrate how Islam can continue to enlighten, augment and direct practice, while adding to and enlivening (perhaps helping to resuscitate) the traditionally humanitarian spirit of youth work. This can only make our endeavours amongst, with and alongside the young people we serve more effective.

The book starts out with chapters by Brian Belton and Tahir Alam, who provide introductory explorations of the relevance of Islamic values to youth work, demonstrating how professional practice can be enriched by these principles, benefiting both Muslim and non-Muslim young people. This may surprise some people in this age of anxiety about the alleged failures of multiculturalism; however the fact of our societal diversity is not going to be wished away. Those who resist societal pluralism would do well to remember that human interdependence is necessary to create civilised co-existence. Besides, there has not been a point for the best part of 3,000 when the islands that make up Britain have been anything else other than pluralist, ethnically, culturally or religiously. So it’s not so much about getting used to it, it’s about getting with it!

The context and pathologised representations of young British Muslims are analysed in detail in the first section by Sughra Ahmed and Tahir Abbas. Muslim young people, they argue, cannot be reduced to a homogeneous ‘problem’ that needs to be ‘fixed’. However, this is not to deny that young people are encountering unique tensions within the communities they live in and wider
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society. Particularly troubling is the ongoing securitised framing of Muslim youth, which looks set to continue under the current coalition government. In reality there is much more to Muslim young people’s lives than just ‘preventing violent extremism’. Like their non-Muslim friends, their social well being can be disadvantaged by poverty, educational underachievement, unemployment, the further reduction of youth and recreational services and in some cases threatened by gang warfare, knife and gun crime.

The second section explains how delivering effective, high quality youth work, informed by Islamic perspectives, can help to provide skills and experiences to deal with these challenges. A distinctive approach to working with Muslim youth is necessary and demonstrated in the good practice discussed by Julie Griffith. However, as Sadek Hamid argues, faith based youth work can create counter productive trends that need alternative models of practice, a theme enthusiastically taken up by Maurice Coles in his framework for youth participation.

The final third of this anthology is devoted to the reflections of youth workers engaged in work with Muslim youth from across the UK. Each contributor, having different stand points and experiences, provide rich insights into the diverse ways of engaging young people and the challenges they encounter. The anonymous autobiographical reflection on growing up as a Muslim and becoming a youth worker is a refreshingly honest example of the dilemmas of trying to successfully negotiate multiple identities. In a concise but intricate analysis Firzana Khan, narrates some of the impacts of marginalisation, categorisation and the ‘weak power’ encompassed in the same, while Irfan Shah assesses the problematic nature of the recent Prevention of Violent Extremism (PVE) agenda and its repercussions on work with young people. Mark Roberts and Zoey Williams respectively explore the relevance of the key concepts of education, community and Ummah in relation to youth work theory. These contributions, which share underlying themes, should be read in sequence. In the next chapter Brian Belton looks at the place of mercy in youth work and how this sentiment links and confirms some of our common needs with our unity via and across faith boundaries. Andrew Smith demonstrates how positive relations can be fostered between Christian and Muslim youth, and how this can cultivate open discussion, maintain integrity and avoid both polemics and apologetics.

Brian Belton’s final chapter relates fragments of his own intellectual and spiritual journey and the centrality of action, echoing a core Islamic teaching of the indispensable link between faith and practice; this provides a fitting conclusion to the book.

All the above accounts powerfully vindicate, communicate and commemorate the necessity of faith and cultural competence as an eminent path to integrity of practice; all emphasise the centrality of the well being and growth of those we
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work with and amongst. As such, as a collection the book champions the best traditions of youth work, within a theme of developmental and critical practice.

We, the writers who have come together with our words and ideas, do not seek to sentimentalise religious belief, which can in certain ideological forms encourage prejudice and violence. However, in our experience the ideals and ethics of the Muslim faith can offer wisdom and new directions which enhance the quality of youth work with Muslim young people and those with different religious backgrounds. This message of solidarity is critical at a time when young people, your and our children, seek meaning, belonging and direction in a confusing, fast changing world. These viewpoints cannot remain feel good rhetoric in situations where young people are demanding urgent positive change. So the task remains to convert theory into practice; we hope we have offered a few useful signposts for this journey.

NOTES

1 Until the sea levels rose following the most recent ice age (the Devensian glaciation) about 8,000 years ago, Britain was part of the European land mass. As such, before that point in time there was no barrier to the exchange and intermingling of populations, beliefs, cultures and even between ‘subspecies’ (Neanderthals were still knocking around in Europe around 30,000 years ago) from across and beyond the European land mass. Incidentally, as Britain became cut off from Europe we have no idea of the skin colour of the people of the newly formed island; there is no reason to suggest it was white for instance.
CONTEXT
BRIAN BELTON

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.

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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, Murjī’ah, Mu’tazili, Athari and Zahiri. Within Shia there are the Zaidiyah, Alaw and Alevi).

However, Islam also encompasses Kharjite 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’
YOUTH WORK AND ISLAM – A GROWING TRADITION

‘Muslims don’t have any time for anything other than formal education’
Such rejoinders, as is pretty obvious, come from people who believe they are able to speak for all Muslims over time and place. However, at the same time, such views also seem to make the point that Muslims have been and are people who play no significant part in conventional youth work.

YOUTH WORK AS A MUSLIM TRADITION

For me, a comment of a young Bangladeshi man (his family had come from what was in the mid-1960s still East Pakistan) named Naeem, with whom I worked in Bethnal Green (East London) in the early 1970s, summed this attitude up and as such it has stuck in my mind:

We (Muslims) have been invisible in youth work because what we do hasn’t been seen as youth work. I organise a football match and I sort of disappear; it’s as if it organised itself! Then all that anyone sees it the football match. They don’t see the before and after of it; what it’s like getting parents to agree, getting the kids to agree! I want to swear but I don’t swear. Because after what is a great big work of diplomacy, negotiation, decision making, trying all the time to be democratic and fair, keeping everyone involved, stopping fights, arguments, getting people to see both sides, all anyone sees is the game! I think I am just taken as one of the kids or something.

This refusal to see Muslim youth workers, that gives rise the stereotypical comments detailed above, I believe to be lazily myopic more than an effort to be purposely untruthful.

Youth work, as Naeem understood, does not have a mainstream as such. The discipline continues to be what it has always been, an eclectic and evolving response to young people, delivered in an almost overwhelming range of forms, in an apparently endless series of locations, deploying a continually growing array of techniques and approaches, which are motivated by a superfluity of motivations, policies and beliefs. Over time, because youth work practice has taken place in such a range of situations, it has been delivered under so many guises (currently often under the auspices of ‘childcare services’) and via a plethora of methods (including informal, non-formal, social, political education) adhering to a shifting, hardly ever definite philosophy. As such the idea of a typical or archetypal form of youth work is fanciful.

This point is exemplified by Hala Saeed, a Muslim woman, who was born in Somalia and migrated to the UK in 1995. She is the youngest child of the Saeed Abdiqader family and was raised, along with her four siblings, by her mother. She now has a young daughter herself, Fatima. Hala’s involvement in youth work is much more recent than Naeem’s. She gained her professional qualification in youth work in 2009 from the YMCA College in East London, and has been involved with several projects in the London borough of...
BELTON

Hounslow, including the Hounslow Youth Offending Service. She is also a Family Program Leader, working with vulnerable Somali parents. She has recently qualified to Teach English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) at Kingston University.

For some years Hala has been involved with community action, often being an advocate for the Somali community in Hounslow and beyond. At the time of writing she was setting up a private community interests company, aimed at supporting Muslims families, while volunteering as a teaching assistant, focusing on Somali refugee children in West London. She hopes to move forward with her teaching career and studies with a Masters degree in Education.

Hala sees youth work and Islam coming together quite logically. For her it would be unreasonable to expect people to successfully meet the responsibilities that come as adulthood dawns without people who have moved beyond that stage being willing to walk with young people as they enter this new phase of their lives;

In Islam, puberty marks the entry to the challenges and responsibilities of life. As such it is described as the age of ‘taklif’, or legal obligation. From this time onwards a young person is obliged to perform the religious duties as an adult Muslim.

For Muslims, their first reference point is the Qur’an, which describes itself as “... a guide and a healing to those who believe” (S.41: V. 44). This plays a significant role in satisfying physical as well as spiritual needs. We as Muslims, and as adults, have an ethical, religious and moral duty make ourselves helpful to young people as they enter the process that taklif involves.

Islam teaches a code of behaviour, social values and gives meaning for our existence. Of particular value during the adolescent transition is its guidance towards toleration and developing adaptive capacities in the face of stressful life events. It can also act as a means of developing a sense of self-respect, while offering teaching about the virtues of family life, and the need to work towards a cohesive society, via a sense of relatedness.

My faith incorporates a comprehensive set of values, ethics and code of behaviour in techniques of social learning, which I believe can provide young people with the opportunity to use their influence and find their personal authority on individual, local community and Ummatic levels. I feel this is what youth work is about.

Traditionally a central consideration of youth work has been justice. The Qur’an shares this concern.

O ye who believe! Stand out firmly for justice, as witnesses to Allah, even as against yourselves, or your parents, or your kin, and whether it be (against) rich or poor: for Allah can best protect both. Follow not the lusts (of your hearts), lest ye swerve, and if ye distort (justice) or decline to do justice, verily Allah is well-acquainted with all that ye do. [An-Nisa 4:35]
Hala has a deep commitment to this kind of sentiment in her work, but in particular with young women (of course anti-sexism has been a basic principal of modern youth work);

Somalis coming to England have gained greater independence, not born of expectation, but necessity. Many arrived in the 1990s as single parents, with several children to support, their husbands killed in the civil war. But the public voice of the Somali community continues to be male. Those unfamiliar with Somali culture perceive women as being in the background, mostly focused on homemaking and raising children.

The reason women's rights in Islam need special concern is because of the position of women in some Muslim countries. What adds insult to injury is the justification of this oppression of women in the name of 'Islam'. How can these societies be 'healed', in the sense that the Qur'an puts it, unless Muslims live up to the ideals of their faith, which teaches them to honour women and ensure that their rights, which are given to them by God, are secured?

In Islam, men and women are asked to equally submit to God, and both are ennobled by the Creator. Despite some stereotypical images and representations of Muslim women as repressed and oppressed, many Muslim women today are actively affirming the rights and responsibilities that they believe the Qur'an affords to them. They are affirming that men and women are created from one soul, to be partners to each other; that males and females have the same religious responsibilities.

The discussion of Muslim women and their roles is an important one for every Muslim, firstly because it's an area in which there are many misconceptions by non-Muslims, which need to be corrected, and secondly some Muslims treat women unjustly in the name of Islam. However, their actions are often a result of cultural or tribal customs and not connected to the religion.

While the role of motherhood is among the highest states a believer can achieve, being a mother and a wife are not the only roles open to a Muslim woman. Islam, amongst other things, permits the women to perform Hajj (pilgrimage), to exercise the vote, engage in politics, to take up employment and run her own business.

In Islam females are associated with 'rehmat' (mercy) fortune and joy. As a wife one is the companion to man (and the man is her companion) in all social, physical and economic endeavours and should not be subjugated in any way. Muslim women have traditionally played a crucial part in their communities, not just in customary roles. Historically women took part in teaching, scholarship, medicine and other significant activities. They were a long way from being subjugated to the men as they were valued for both their courage and wisdom. Within Islam religion is understood as a guide to living and life; it provides a structure and boundaries within which women are held in high regard, with as much potential to be respected and followed as a role model within her community and wider society as men.
At least from the time of Naeem’s entry into the field to Hala’s involvement, Muslims have been part of youth work, as participants and facilitators. As such, Islam has stimulated and informed youth work practice ever since its birth as a national, generic service phenomenon in the 1960s. There was also a Muslim presence before this, in some of the numerous enclaves of missionary, religious, instructional, moral and disciplinary attention to young people from the 19th Century onwards that some historians mistakenly propose as straightforwardly the direct progenitors of today’s practice. In the 18th and 19th Centuries the influence of Islam was strong enough to attract converts amongst the English upper classes.

For all this, it is probably enough to say that Muslims, and thus Islam, have been part of youth work in the UK at least as long as living memory. The following pages, in a small way, are, added to the other aims of the chapter, an effort to engender some recognition and understanding of this.

‘ILM’ AND YOUTH WORK

The term used for knowledge in Arabic is ‘ilm, which has a much wider connotation than its synonyms in English and other Western languages. ‘Knowledge’ falls short of expressing all the aspects of ‘ilm. Knowledge in the West is often taken to mean information about something, divine or corporeal, while ‘ilm is an all-embracing term covering theory, action and education; it gives these activities a distinctive shape. It has been argued that this type of comprehension is of supreme value for Muslims and indeed, ‘ilm is Islam, in that Islam is the path of ‘knowledge’.

Outside of Islam it is arguable if any other religion or ideology puts so much emphasis on the importance of ‘ilm. Each of us, being the creations of Allah (the first educator and the absolute guide of humanity) no matter how humble or even ill informed, has the potential to access and add to ‘ilm; attempting to understand and listen to our fellow humans (not necessarily agreeing with them). This can be understood as one of the basic precepts of ‘ilm and it is why (I think) ‘ilm is at least one of the pillars of youth work and as such necessary to the thoughtful practice of the same.

This perspective is, in my experience, part of the treasure that many Muslim youth workers have brought to their practice. However, this kind of contribution has gone largely unacknowledged, partially because when we talk of the conjoining of youth work and Islam we understand it, as an expression, as a relatively recent aspect of the wider field of practice, and partly because it has been carried into youth work as part of a ‘Muslim package’ that has been delivered, in the main, quite unselfconsciously. By that I mean that most effective youth workers bring facets of themselves to their practice and it is the resultant heterogeneity of response that makes youth work a uniquely responsive and eclectic discipline. At times, in certain places, ‘ilm, as an aspect of Islamic identity...
and culture, has been infused into youth work practice in a pleasingly informal way and much of what follows will relate to this.

Naeem described how youth work can be recognised as ‘ilm

You can only really teach so much and perhaps certain things; you can pass on information and guidance and kids can remember all that, and that might be thought of as knowledge. But people need something more than just being taught or instructed. People have the means within them, a sort of light, which can illuminate understanding. At the same time that is a gateway that allows awareness to sort of happen. No one can do that for someone, although shutting kids up and cutting them off can do a lot to stop it. But experience, action, going out and doing things in the world provides the sparks. That is what I want to do as a youth worker, and I grow from it too.

How do I know this? Well, the Qur'an tells you this. It encourages people to come together, care for each other, teach each other, be tolerant, listen, collaborate and that is how things happen and how people become more than what they are. No matter how frustrating youth work can be, it’s being able to make some room for all that to happen which makes it worthwhile...more than worthwhile for me – it expresses what I am as a Muslim and a human being! Yes, you can be taught, but in the end you can’t be taught everything by someone else, you have to do the learning for yourself – you can get people to teach you, but that is no good unless you are going to learn. But we have it in us to do that, working and living with others.

ISLAM, SCIENCE AND YOUTH WORK

My first job as a professionally qualified youth worker took me to Tower Hamlets and the Arnold Circus, Brick Lane district. From my agency in Virginia Road I undertook a number of projects with young Muslims, in liaison the now legendary ‘Avenues Unlimited’, on the Chiksand Estate. Much of this work was relatively instinctive, you kind of learnt as you went along. Looking back, the kids we worked with must have been very patient or perhaps felt sorry for us; they probably worked more with us than we did with them. However, in the last few years there has been a growing consciousness of the need to think about youth work in Muslim contexts. More recently perhaps there has been a few of us who have been endeavouring to bring attention to how the teachings and traditions of Islam can and do contribute to our efforts to serve young people from a range of backgrounds, regardless of religious affinities. This being the case, in this chapter I want to highlight a sense of the development of youth work influenced by Islam. I will argue that this has a history of at least half a century, although the dynamics of what might be called the ‘Islamic world-historic legacy’ underpin the nature and conduct of practice just as law, education, medicine and the foundation of the achievements of Occidental science have significant roots in Islamic heritage.
Amongst the very first things a trainee youth worker is taught (in one way or another) is the skills of observation; how to look at/inspect things and people. This is usually followed by the recording of these observations. These recordings are forms of evidence that work has taken place and perhaps information about the trajectory of particular pieces of practice and/or agency direction over time. But they can also prove to be a means of analysis of what has happened and/or been accomplished; what people do when things are done, how individuals and groups undertake tasks and why they might be motivated to act in certain ways. This process is undertaken firstly to provide a record of events, when and who was involved, but the ‘why’ question takes the procedure into another ‘diagnostic’ realm; it is at that crossroads that youth work meets with science. The resultant awareness of what has happened can be used to predict future events;

If this thing happened, with these people involved, in this way, then it is likely that, given similar circumstances, much the same thing will happen the next time those people do those things, in that way.

This provides the potential either to seek to replicate situations, change personnel or environments, to alter outcomes. In short, this is doing what science seeks to do; manage or control what seemed to be (without observation, recording and analysis) random, unpredictable and uncontrollable events or circumstances – ‘truth from proof’ – not ‘the’ truth, but the pursuit of the same, or as Arab philosopher Al Kindi, wrote, ‘…nothing should be dearer to the seeker of truth than the truth itself’ (*Tabaqat al-‘itbia*, Ibn abi-Usiba’s).

While science cannot be said to be solely the product of Muslim endeavour, the call of Islam to seek knowledge, in the broadest sense of the word, has had a profound effect on the development of scientific knowledge. According to the Prophet, seeking knowledge is an obligation upon every Muslim (cited in Siddiqui, 1990, 135–6).

The Arab ‘Golden Age’ of Baghdad, Persia, and Muslim Iberia, from 632 to 1258 AD, was the first of a sequence of ‘golden ages’ of Muslim thought, that encompassed a geographical and spiritual terrain from Shiite Iran to Mughal India, up to the 18th century. These waves of intellectual fervour represent great world wide endeavours and adventures (Sinbad, the fictional sailor from Basrah, might be thought of as a sort of metaphor relating to this period) on the part of Muslims to seek, collect and refine knowledge. This led to new discoveries and innovations. Scholars and researchers, working from Samarkand, in modern-day Uzbekistan, to Cordoba in Spain, advanced our understanding and application of (amongst other things):

- **Astronomy** - there is a vast crater on the moon named after Astronomer Al Manon
- **Chemistry, engineering** - the achievements of al-Jazari, a Turkish engineer of the 13th century, include the crank, the camshaft, and the reciprocating piston; the exiled Emir Abdal Rahman brought irrigation systems and unique architecture to Cordoba, Spain.

- **Mathematics** - Musa al-Khwarizmi developed algebra in 9th century Baghdad, drawing on work by mathematicians in India - his invention of algorithms made cell phone technology possible, while Omar Khayyam, the admired poet of the Rubaiyat, was a mathematical genius who calculated the length of a year to be 365.242 days – atomic clocks agree with him to within millionths of a second.

- **Medicine** - it was Syrian-born Al Nafis, who revealed that the blood flows from the heart, through the lungs, to the body and back again; ibn Sina, wrote the textbook *Canon of Medicine* that was a standard work in Europe's universities until the 1600s.

- **Philosophy** - as a corollary and precursor to all the above was taken to new heights. As I’m making a list I must also mention Al Ma'mun, who founded Baghdad's international House of Wisdom from which came foundations for modern mathematics, astronomy, chemistry, medicine, and literature.

These achievements are just exemplars of a sophisticated culture and civilization that was based on belief in God – as such what is known as the 'Dark Ages' can be seen to be something of a European misnomer, as it was during this period that a vast, extended debate took place between scientists, philosophers and theologians on the nature of physical reality and limits to human reason. Indeed, it seems the very basics of the Arabic language were formed out of the need to express mathematical principles. As such, one can confidently claim that early Muslim culture set the foundation for the Renaissance in Europe and for nearly every aspect of the modern world. It is this basis on which youth work stands as a potentially civilising discipline.

**Dialectic**

However, this cultural flowering was also a means of developing the overriding conclusion that was to arise out of the ‘gathering of knowledge’ that the Golden Age was. This was a protracted era of concentrated and multifaceted dialectic, under the Islamic auspices, which grew out of a consciousness that violent (violating) force can hardly ever positively resolve issues of the spirit or soul with regard to individuals, groups, communities or societies. The awareness that this search confirmed was that the path to whatever we might achieve as human beings lies in the honing of knowledge and understanding through the commitment to dialectical relations between people. This dialectic (not simplistic dialogue - chatting) is for me is the rock on which the practice of youth work stands.
At the same time it is a product of Islamic culture, a means to acquire and comprehend *`ilm*.

This means both teacher and learner need to be aiming to promote ‘dialectic’. This, straightforwardly, is a situation wherein ideas can shared and so developed in order to promote new ideas and insights. The diagram below outlines this process:

![Dialetic Diagram](image)

Here you can see that one person starts of with an idea (Thesis). This demands to be met with ideas that might challenge or enlarge that idea (Antithesis). This brings about a new understanding (the two perspectives coming together – the Synthesis)

A similar graphic illustrates this as a sort of ‘intellectual pathway’ for developing our understanding of reality (it is a plain helix, but it reminds us of the DNA structure that lies at the core of each of us and all living things):

![Helix Diagram](image)

As you can see, this is a leap forward from simplistic dialogue, which can become pretty much aimless (or sometimes more destructively degenerate into
gossip) or a give rise to a situation wherein it is all too easy for the teacher to dominate the process via their aims to educate. This said, the dialectical process of mutual discovery can be understood as the sort of interaction one might aim for following the establishment of dialogue. Dialectic may arise out of dialogue to generate mutual insight that can be expressed. This contrasts to what might be thought of as a ‘stationary dialogue’, wherein reciprocal insight is not necessarily engendered and as such remain be unexpressed.

The above coil might be thought of as potentially eternal rather than the picture of a whole journey, as the dialectic is never fully resolved, returning as it does to the start of the of the literal voyage of discovery (dialogue).

For all this, the point is for both parties involved (although more than two people might be implicated) in the dialect to develop insight, understanding and awareness. It is a different process to that premised on the aim that the student should somehow simply learn from or be educated by the teacher. This would in fact not be education at all; at best it is advice giving, instruction or confessional (perhaps encompassing symbolic or actual absolution and penitence) at worse it could be understood as indoctrination, domination or colonization.

Some readers may have been aware of some or all of the above, but in terms of this chapter it had to be stated because it is the sort of runway on which the tradition of Islamic education lands on the British youth work scene; it is just a hint of the cultural foundation of the Islamic influence in education.

‘UMMAH’ - THE INFLUENCE OF ISLAM

I can’t truly say that there was a moment in my own life when I first felt the influence of Islam on my direction in life. I was born and brought up in Newham in East London, which for my first dozen or so years was East and West Ham. I was an inhabitant of the latter, less prosperous of the two then different boroughs. At the age of 11 I was consigned to Burke Secondary Modern School. This was very much the dustbin of West Ham’s low achievers and juvenile miscreants, for whom education was as much a joke as it was an imposition. At the time the borough languished in the deepest depths of poor achievement in secondary education in Britain, during a period when the UK slithered around the bottom echelon of secondary educational attainment in Western Europe. Hence I can boast that I attended, what was probably at the time, the worst school in Western Europe!

My behaviour at primary school had led to my expulsion from Greengate School in Plaistow, so I never actually took the 11-plus examinations that decided which part of the then tripartite system one would be sentenced to, but my former head made sure I was set nicely in the very lowest stream at Burke after telling me, ‘Belton, you are headed nowhere but prison’; did I detect a subtle hint of pessimism about my future?
On my first day in secondary education I found myself being one of two English speakers in my class. That first day was less than 20 years after the Partition of India, at a point in time when the effects of then recent civil war in Cyprus were still being dealt with and, as a consequence, although I had very little awareness of this at the time, the majority of my peers were Muslims. Our teacher was Mr Said, a gentle but firm Pakistani Muslim. He was one of the many teachers who had come to Burke from across the world. The school also boasted American, Canadian, Indian, South African, Ugandan, Kenyan, Hong Kong Chinese and Russian teachers, not a few of whom had come to the East End, some via Oxford, Cambridge and Harvard, to hone their skill in a challenging environment. Indeed, an American teacher, Mr Wilson, told me, ‘if you can teach at Burke you can teach anywhere’. Hence we also attracted more than our share of well meaning but ill prepared young men and women carrying a missionary zeal, who at other times, not long before, East Enders would have, without question, considered their social ‘betters’. As it was, at that point in history, Union activity and the concomitant class consciousness was blowing through the Docklands like a mighty wind and our teachers put up with an awful lot from Burke’s reluctant scholars, but it has to be said, they had an impact. However, as my first teacher, none had the same influence as Mr Said and it was he who taught me his understanding of ‘ummah’ (أمcapitalize) but, probably more importantly, a way to activate the spirit of this concept.

Unlike the notion of ‘community’, which is often seen as its equivalent, ummah embodies a potentially all embracing inclusiveness (ummatun wahidah in the Qur'an refers to whole of the Islamic world unified). The meaning of community encompasses both sameness and difference; it defines some people as ‘inside’ and others as ‘outside’. As such, community is effectively a means of discrimination; the tighter a community boundary is, the less likely it is that it will interact with other communities. In such situations communities become isolated, introverted and inward looking; they tend to be arenas were little knowledge comes in or goes out; hence they are contrary to the ethos of Islam as they become pools of ignorance and as such are inherently prone to prejudice (pre-judging). This may partly explain why Islamic rulers in the classical period encouraged and welcomed Jewish and Christian scholarship.

Contrary to the negative effects of community, the Qu’ranic precepts concerning ‘ilm (the living out of ummah) provide pragmatic means to avoid the development of prejudice, which tend to arise out of the propagation/sharing/promotion of ignorance. While ummah can be understood to refer specifically to Islam, Islam does not preclude people by birth, creed, colour, education, race, ethnicity, culture, neighbourhood, wealth, poverty, intellectual or political leanings etc. in the way that community does. If you think about it, it is very hard to either enter or extract yourself from community. In fact, often when people leave relatively tightly bound communities they are seen to have ‘sold out’ or be ‘traitors’. On the other hand those attempting to enter communities will usually have to deal with...
allegations of being ‘outsiders’ and/or ‘deserters’ from another community. I, as a West Ham supporter, would find it difficult to enter into the ‘Arsenal’ community. I will never cease to be a former West Ham community member. Likewise, all the other ‘faithful’ West Ham supporters will see me as irredeemably a defector and turncoat.

This process, I believe, is the antithesis of ummah, in that you, me, everybody on earth, have the capacity to accept and be accepted by everyone else by way of the duty to accept those who enter into ummah; ummah is a sacred destiny of humanity in oneness, while community is the purposeful carving up of people into discreet categories and as such a form of violence. In ummah there is ‘collectiveness’ and ‘connectiveness’; we are all football supporters. The differences between West Ham and Arsenal are comparable only to the dissimilarities between a pear and an apple and as such representative of the wonderful diversities that make life worth living, in that we can appreciate the qualities of each without one precluding us from the other (up the ‘Ammers!’).

MUSLIMUN

Mr Said also taught me another retrospective lesson. Muslimun is the plural form of Muslim, meaning, ‘those who have peacefully submitted’ i.e., the believers of Islam. This collective submission might be thought of as part of the creation of the connection or wholeness between those within the faith (potentially all humanity). For me, this bond reflects something of the nature of Islam, promoting as it does a concept that human beings are born with the capacity to be integrated and become part of a collective and connective expression of being.

In much the same way aspects of our shared and individual life, religious, political or educational, need not be regarded as separate spheres, as they are expressions of the wholeness/connectivity/collectivity that we prospectively embody. To separate my education from my faith, or from the rest of who I am, rather than making room for or allowing the same to coalesce, is yet another violent act; symbolically or metaphorically similar to cutting off a limb and examining it as if it had only a tangential relationship to the rest of my body. At the same time, this severance can create division between me and others. The possibility to share our ‘whole selves’ is undermined as individuals compartmentalize different aspects themselves. Instead of the whole ‘me’ connecting with the whole ‘you’, we will need to find the bits of us that can meet, but in such a process we will identify that which cannot be accept by the other. Unless we are individually integrated how might we coagulate with that which everyone else is or might be (particularly if every self is similarly split)?

To me, this violation of self separation is exacerbated by the effort to dissect education into formal and informal elements (as is the habit in much youth work training). The good teacher (or the enlightened youth worker) like Mr. Said,
will use what others might recognise as informal and formal methods interchangeably (and even both at the same time!). But for my first secondary school teacher there would be no dichotomy, as his efforts were integrated into an educational enterprise that was about my realisation of myself as an integrated individual and as potentially part of ummah. He once told us:

...isn’t my behaviour saying a lot about who I am, how I live, how I want to live, how I want to treat others and how I might expect to be treated myself? Surely my behaviour is not a separate thing that is nothing to do with me? Is my behaviour what I make seen of myself in the world? Do others conclude, probably quite rightly, that I am doing whatever it is I do for a reason?

That, as my father used to say, is quite a ‘straightener’. Mr. Said, in the space taken up by four short questions about himself (not statements or instructions about ‘you’) for the listener, reason replaces excuses, as consequences are realised. In the process the ground is prepared whereon one might become aware and so responsible. Part of the foundation of wisdom must surely be a sense of my own responsibility, my impact on the world, as this is intimately tied an awareness of the consequences (for me an others) of my actions.

As such, now more than 40 years on, I can recognise the influence on and inspiration of this kind of response on my practice, both as a youth worker and lecturer, while, in the spirit of ummah and ‘ilm, I pass this on to the people I work with, for and amongst.

MODELS OF GOOD PRACTICE

Mr Said was a good educator, which included being a teacher, but he did more than teach. He was prepared to be taught by us! He was, seemingly, endlessly interested in us, his pupils, and asked as many questions of us as we asked of him (probably more). Often bad behaviour was exposed to his genuine curiosity. ‘Why did you do that?’ The answer was always met with another question. For example;

‘Because I wanted to’

‘And why did you want to?’

The overall effect of this was most of us couldn’t be bothered to act up in his class because of the third degree consequences, which obliged us to look at ourselves and our motivations, and often the consequences of the same; ‘What effect do you think that had?’ ‘How do you feel about it now?’ This was hard work as one thing most East Enders of my generation could not help doing, in common with my Indian, Cypriot, Turkish and Pakistani class mates it seemed, was answer any question asked of us. I think Mr Said understood this; it was something he had learnt about us. Of course, when someone takes the trouble to learn about you, you find yourself learning about them; learning, if it is learning, is hardly ever a one way process.
YOUTH WORK AND ISLAM – A GROWING TRADITION

So, Mr Said was not just a teacher, in that he was a social educator and a social critic, constantly involved in his own social education. I now understand that he was also a youth worker; a person who literally worked with, cared and learnt about, taught, talked and listened to youth.

SOCIAL KINDNESS

So youth work practice is and has been carried out by Muslims in all sorts of contexts and ways. Over the years I have collected many examples of these as part of an effort to discern how Islam can benefit and broaden our response to young people. Mostly they are instances in practice where a socialisation within Islam can be seen to have had an impact, but what makes them fascinating for me is how this influence is largely unselfconscious; to this extent it is natural or instinctual, thus it flows from people, and so it is gentle. I would suggest that the overall authority is as such a sort of social kindness in an atmosphere that has been given some very sharp edges by Western capitalism (most youth work has been funded, directly or indirectly, by the state, which as I write is waging illegal wars that have been sanctioned by no one outside a corporate/political elite).

MUZAFFER

Muzaffer arrived in Britain in the late 1950s from Turkey at the age of 3. His parents were observant Sunni Muslims. He was brought up in Brighton, where his father worked in the catering industry. His mum found employment, first as a cleaner and then as an administrator in a big Hotel.

The family came to live in North London. As a 17 year old Muzaffer got a job, like his dad, working in the catering industry. He was married in 1977 to Aisha, a student (who ultimately became a primary school teacher). Her family had fled Uganda and the persecution of Idi Amin in 1972. The couple had two children and faith was an important part of family life.

It was through the children’s attendance at a youth club that Muzaffer became involved in youth work. By 2000 he had nearly 15 years experience working with young people, firstly as a football coach and then, after gaining a string of part-time qualifications, a detached youth worker. He told me he would certainly have done the work for nothing, although could not have devoted as much time to it as he did as a paid worker. His faith has been a constant source of inspiration and reflection in his youth work practice.

At first I didn’t have a clue how to work with young people. I just did what come naturally and did the best I could. It was not until I started to work with others that I became a little bit critical of what I saw. I had always seen kids as being basically good. When they were a naughty there was nearly always a reason and once you sorted that out things were generally ok. So when I first went to
BELTON

meetings with youth workers it felt slightly uncomfortable, because they seemed to all agree that the kids they were working with 'had problems'; it was as if there was something wrong with them, like as individuals. They either were 'unable to concentrate' or 'lacked self esteem' or were covered by an expression I never understood – they 'had issues'.

But the Qu’ran asks ‘Why do they not reflect on themselves?’ It is too easy just to point out what someone else does, especially someone who is young, and say, ‘the reason they’re bad is that they are bad’. If I look to myself, ‘What is it about me that is not helping this person to be good?’ Then I think you tend to get a lot further with the person you are working with.

This attitude is in alignment with the position that Sufism attributes to Muhammad;

Happy are those who find fault with themselves instead of finding fault with others. Abu al Qusim (Muhammad)

MODELS OF DEFICIT

What Muzaffer has seen in operation was the ‘deficit model’ of young people that runs through youth work practice and related literature. This perspective depicts those we work with as lacking something in themselves; the attitude that lower achievement is due to a problem with the individual rather than considering the role of institutions (such as schools) instructional practices, organisational structures, etc. Deficit is often ascribed to individuals using a lexicon of vague terms, mostly drawn from the overlap between psychotherapy and psychoanalysis, that include ‘attention seeking’ (who does not seek attention and if someone was seeking it why wouldn’t we give it to them?) and ‘lack of self–esteem’ - although this estimate hardly ever provides what this lack is being compared to; people who have ‘just enough’ self-esteem perhaps? At the same time the person making such a statement tends to neglect telling us how or by what criteria they are measuring self-esteem, or in what way they are qualified to undertake this measurement.

The likes of William Ayers (2005, 2006, with Ford 2008, with Quinn and Stovall 2009, with Alexander-Tanner 2010) is the latest in a long line of thinkers that have written about the effects of young people’s experience of being treated as ‘lacking’, the consequences of the same and possible strategies to avoid the blithe (and often blind) application of deficit labels (see Berg 1972, Holt 1964 and Kohl 1991 for example). This apart, you can probably think of many examples of this kind of amateur psychiatry based on the premise (and generally bald assumption) of another’s lack. However, in the main, a prognosis of this type suggests that the person being referred to is suffering from some personal malady/pathology. It is in fact much less common to hear workers look to political, economic, environmental and/or situational influences on behaviour, and
it is even rarer to find youth workers, as an initial response, who like Muzaffer, look at how they themselves might have elicited or invited the seemingly negative, but perhaps rational, response of a young person.

THE ‘RIGHT WORD’

From an Islamic perspective largely unsubstantiated assumptions about young people’s psychological state, or ‘uneducated’ guesses about people’s disposition/personality, are not acceptable.

O you who believe! Keep your duty to Allah and fear Him, and speak always the right word [Surah Al-Ahzab (33): ayat 70]

The ‘right word’ is not some handy expression that seems to fit a particular moment or response. To find the ‘right word’ we need to at the very least look at a range of possible motivations. If we neglect this investigation those of us in the professional realm have failed to use our professional judgement. But whoever one might be, the progeny of such negligence is prejudice; we become pre-judges, setting ourselves up above others (young people) based on what we believe to be our superior experience or insight. At this point the worker has allowed the resource of personal humility to slip through their fingers, and as The Prophet Muhammad said; Whoever is humble to men for God’s sake, may God exalt his eminence. (Al-Mamum Al-Suhrawardy Allama Sir Abdullah. 1954 p12) That humility is an acknowledgement just how little we actually know about the complex character of any individual (a creation of God no less) let alone those we might see for a few hours in one particular context in any given week.

ELENA

From my earliest days as a youth worker I was involved with Gypsy, Traveller and Roma young people. This was chiefly related to my own background, but from the late-1960s through to the mid-1970s I was involved in the lively and, at times, brutal politics arising out of what was nothing less than the persecution of the nomadic people of Britain. It was at this time that I met Elena, whose parents had come to London from Bulgaria just after the Second World War. Elena, a Sufi Muslim, had been involved with Travellers from the late-1940s, motivated in part by the response to the threat to her family (labelled as ‘Pomaks’1) under Nazi and then Communist influence during and after World War Two.

After losing touch with her religion for a few years in her 20s and becoming a single parent, politics did much to fill the vacuum. But later Elena found a new rigor for her faith and, over the years, had become something of a student of Islam. This, she told me, tongue in cheek, worried her parents almost as much as her previous wandering away from with her beliefs.
At the time I knew Elena she was part of the growing Human Rights movement. Her son, who she brought up in Islam, was very much the centre of her existence, but her active interest in social justice and minority rights was an enduring preoccupation.

In a long conversation that went on through one cold January night, while observing police and bailiff behaviour at a prospective eviction (such a presence often meant that removals of caravans would be less brutal) Elena told me;

In Britain most institutions, legal, educational or whatever, were formed during the time of British colonialism and it would be surprising if they did not operate showing that influence and history. So youth workers and social workers are sent out into communities just as missionaries were sent to India and Africa to bring ‘civilisation’ and ‘education’ to the ‘natives’, which meant getting them to act according to the standards and values that were ‘acceptable’ to ‘respectable’ British people.

The idea was to make them ‘good subjects’ and useful to the Empire even if a lot of well meaning people didn’t see this. That is also the purpose of education and welfare in Britain. It is not really education; it is not about ‘helping others’ or ‘learning to question’ – why would the government sponsor that? It is a form of colonisation that uses indoctrination and propaganda designed to produce relatively cheap, relatively flexible workers that are useful to capitalist enterprise. Of course not all teachers or social workers see this; else many of them would not want to do what it is they do. But we live in a capitalist state, what else could be the case?

Since this conversation I have grown to understand that while seeing people in deficit has an obscure lineage, its genesis in Britain is probably intrinsically linked to the age of colonialism. This was a time when the privileged of the Empire sought to bring their culture, religion and education to what they took to be those in deficit; the ‘natives’ of the subjugated territories. Of course, this was the social guise of control and domination, via forms of indoctrination, which were likely to have fooled the missionaries and servants of Empire as least as much as those they looked endow with the (questionable) benefits of European civilisation.

British institutions, education, law, government etc. were formed, shaped and defined and as a consequence of and so reflective of the colonial period. This being the case, these arms of the state are still imbued with the culture of colonialism and as such propagate a deficit perspective of those they encompass, both functionaries and clients; the educator approaches the pupil or student not primarily with the motivation to learn about them, but with the view that they are more or less ignorant (they lack knowledge/awareness/understanding).

For example, the moment one presents oneself to a medical practitioner one is treated as someone who lacks health; a person who is sick, not as an individual who is just not as healthy as they might be, one who has a level of health, but is experiencing a measure of discomfort or relative infirmity. Likewise, the educator
approaches those they seek to educate with the assumption that they are ignorant and maybe they are in some respects, but they also have something valuable to teach the educator; this knowledge/information is the means to make the teacher a more effective educator.

I was reminded of Elena’s position recently by a young Bektashi Islam woman, who originally came to the UK from Kosovo. Antigona, who a while ago was working as a volunteer with young people in the north of England, talked to me about an ambition that is often expressed in youth work circles; to ‘instigate change’:

Change from what to what? Who asked anyone to change them? When did anyone write to Council and ask for someone to come down here and change them? What’s this change for? What is it that needs changing about people and who decides how much change and when the change might start happening and where it will end? I think we are talking about changing people to be more like the people that are looking for them to change…Let’s change the neighbourhood; how we gonna know if the majority of the people living there want this change we are working at? What we gonna do, knock on people’s doors and ask them what it is they want changing? That’s gonna be a big job ain’t it!

I am so often struck how Islam is (despite what its media profile might suggest) a questioning faith; questions arise from the search (quest) for knowledge.

MUJAHADA (STRIVING)

For me, at that time, Elena’s stance was a pretty radical and her outlook has continued to haunt my thinking up to the present, but she did not adopt the usual anti-colonial rhetoric or propose some sort of revolution. Her response to her perspective provided an insight into how her faith guided her practice;

Sufism has the something called ‘mujahada’ (I later found out this is related to jihad) which is an intense determination to follow a spiritual life that the Prophet exemplified. The hardest conflict is the struggle with your physical self, which is morally more demanding than protesting against or fighting others, but produces something in the individual that is more permanent than just turning the oppressors into the oppressed by what looks like victory but is in fact the continuation of injustice.

This stance reflects the position of the 14th century Persian Gnostic, Sayyid Haydar Amuli, that jihad, at the higher levels, becomes a struggle against the self and against the doubts and misgivings of the speculative intellect. There is also a famous hadith of the Prophet Muhammad relating to returning form the battle field where he told his followers, ‘We return from the lesser struggle [jihad al-asghar] to the greater struggle [jihad al-akbar]. To which his followers asked, “what struggle can be greater than that of the battle field?” To which Muhammad replied, ‘The battle of the soul [ruh] over the ego [nafs].’ However,
this can also be taken as a profoundly anti-colonial attitude, echoed by the likes of Steve Biko in his passionate assertion that as soon as one rejects the label of ‘the oppressed’ one is no longer oppressed. (Biko 1978, p 61-78). This change of perspective is not achieved primarily by a conflict with others, but by a struggle with self to overcome a perspective born out of persecution and domination. This means transplanting a more rational and autonomous view of self as first and foremost the glorious, complex and beautiful creation of God.

Elena’s work was essentially built around learning about and being sensitive to the mujahada (the striving) of others; being able to identify with the inner travail this involves for the individual. Mujahada can be very informed and move on a solid trajectory, but for many of us, perhaps often for the young, this inner striving can have a confused direction and/or be guided by a not altogether rationalised purpose or clear motivation; it is not ‘just there’ it is something that ‘becomes’ over time and contexts. Like much of what makes us human, the spiritual, like the intellectual or the physical, is something in the process of growth and development (known in Arabic as, tazkiyyah, lit., ‘self-purification’). This is what I, retrospectively, think Elena understood and had come to know how to work with. As she informed me;

Finding what we believe in is not about being told or even guided, although this might help. People need to go through their own struggles; those struggles belong to them and they are for them. Allah does not take away our tribulation but he has given us the means to face and overcome obstacles, and perhaps make them something we learn from. If we didn’t have these things, if we did not have the challenges of life, how could we become more than what we are? How could we develop?

For me this has become a driving force in my work with others. Blame or bemoaning my misfortune is very much an easy exit and something that is profoundly ‘anti-developmental’. As soon as I unload my situation as being caused by external forces I have shed responsibility for my own actions and claimed that there is a force that shifts my destiny, which in that shifting is greater than God. For sure, social factors have an influence on what I do and how I do it, but none of us are ‘corks in a social sea’. We have our intellect and will, the sail and rudder, given to us by God. We also have the compass of His word and the teaching of His Prophets. We are not helpless or without the means to chart a root; we have a course to steer in life. Like Muzaffer, Elena’s work was about developing her own consciousness of these assets within herself and others. This is also where I think Antigona was coming from;

The work is not, for me anyway, about changing others. It’s about me changing in response to them; that’s a skill I can develop and I’m getting good at that. And, if they want to change something, about themselves or where they live, I think they can do it without me needing to change them. But I can change my response, what I do, for
them to change themselves if they want to or, if they want, retain things about themselves that others want to change...the ‘change bullies’...ha ha!

COLONIAL MENTALITY

Franz Fanon (1965, 1967) generates similar sentiments to Elena, Muzaffer and Antigona, arguing that colonised environments engender a sort of colonial mentality wherein the colonised take on the values of the coloniser and measure themselves according to those standards, although, as a colonised person, they can never achieve these norms. This gives rise to hatred of self and at the same time a hatred of the coloniser, so condemning the colonised to live in a neurotic and toxic environment of hate and blame. The progressive initial response to this is to somehow cast off the coloniser’s categorisations in order to make room for the development of a more humane and liberated understanding of self. Once more, this requires the colonised to enter into a struggle with themselves rather than adopt or be recruited by ill-defined notions of social rebellion or revolution into forms of violence and by association self-denigration. Such a path can lead to little more than the reversal of roles and the continuance of hatred. Pol Pot’s Cambodia and currently Zimbabwe might be seen as cases in point.

THINGS CANNOT CHANGE UNLESS YOU CHANGE

But the situation is not confined to traditional areas of colonisation. Eldridge Cleaver (1967) reflects on how the welfare system in America caused young Blacks to see themselves as principally the recipients. His insistence (echoed by Stokely Carmichael, 1967) was that Black people needed to reject the position they had been assigned (and that they took on) by those who wished to exploit them. At the same time Cleaver argued that Blacks needed to develop a different notion of who they were and what it was they wanted to base their own values, hopes and ambitions on.

What Cleaver was positing was that ‘things cannot change unless you change’. As much as environments can dictate the response of individuals, individuals, collectively, can change environments by their response to them. But people will not be able to alter environments via the efforts of professionals, such as youth workers, to propagate a view of the individual as pathological or ‘lacking’ something (deficit models). Cleaver, Carmichael, Biko and Fanon all essentially confirm the process of mujahada; that people are capable of, and we should expect them and ourselves to undertake, a disciplined and determined examination of themselves in order that we might work towards a world without colonisers or the colonised. In the words of the Prophet,
BELTON

The most excellent jihad is that for the conquest of self; He who knoweth his own self, knoweth God (Bukhari Sharee)

This emphasis has always appealed to me as a means to carry out and a general aim of my work with young people. Overall it is very straightforward; the insistence on attempting to see those I work with in a positive light (the light of God?) as beings that hold within them all the potential of a creation of God, and working with them on projects, events and activities that might be part of that which causes them to embark on, continue and endure their own consistent and focused mujahada. In doing that I maintain my own mujahada and together we move towards an evermore liberated environment, as it is made up of evermore liberated individuals.

THE OFFERING OF SELF

Muzaffer, Naeem, Antigona, Mr Said and Elena, from different perspectives within Islam, had developed a sort of anti-deficit approach, but in each of them this was largely an unselfconscious response, not really something consciously worked for or against. If you like, it was in them, long before they got into the realm of youth and community work or education. Their immersion in Islam made their responses something of their nature; a gentle but nevertheless energetic emanation, coming from the people they were.

It is something quite difficult for people coming into training in youth work to really grasp that it is not doing things in this way or that which is seminal. The codes and commands of the books and websites devoted to informal education have a place, as must the policy and organisational demands placed on youth work. But the richness of the practice is the people who deliver the work and those that participate in the same as our clients. The most effective youth workers are those that are able to bring a little of their unique selves to what they do. We are at our best when we can offer this literal distinction while generating a genuine enthusiasm for those we work with to teach us about themselves. In this you might be able to detect something of a peaceful submission, in that it probably requires some humility and suspension of ego. Unless we do this how will we know those we work with, build associations with them or engender trust? If we do not know them, how can they know us? If we disallow them from teaching us about their wants or needs, their hopes, troubles and joys, how will we be able to work with them effectively?

This is what Elena, Naeem, Hala, Antigona and Muzaffer told me about; how they, as individuals, people who are Muslims, learnt about those they worked with and amongst, how they saw them as a resource more than whatever personal knowledge they as practitioners had. This is how they, personally, from themselves, interpreted their practice – it is that which made (and makes) their youth work distinctive, humane and effective; a fulfilling and fascinating mujahada.
YOUTH WORK AND ISLAM – A GROWING TRADITION

FAITH BASED WORK

There has been a comparatively great deal of talk and writing about ‘faith based practice’ within youth work over the last decade or so, but I’m not sure there is a great deal of discernable commonality between or even within faith motivated practice. Some years ago I was talking to someone who worked for a Christian youth organisation. He and his colleagues would wander around a midlands city centre wearing Parker jackets with huge crosses emblazoned on the back. He told me about strolling up to a young man and, without introduction or any preamble, telling him, ‘Jesus loves you’. He went on to claim that just making this statement changed this young person’s life. I have found so called faith based work peppered with these sorts of claims and anecdotes. A few magic words start a palliative procedure that in turn fires-up a process of redemption.

This instance is not meant to exemplify Christian youth work, but it does ask the question if simplistic evangelical approaches, seemingly premised on a ‘road to Damascus’ principle, often motivated by the wish to play a saviour role, perhaps itself arising out of a lack of other practice options/direction, is wholly beneficial to either practitioner or client.

The YMCA, integration and mujahada

One of the biggest youth organisations in the world, the YMCA, does have evangelicism as part of its historical underpinning, but I think the distinction that has evolved from practice is what the organisation asks of those that became part of it. The fulcrum of the movement has become the cultivation of mind, body and spirit; a kind of take on the ‘three-in-one’ notion recognisable as inherent in much of Christian belief.

Within this culture, an ethos similar to muslimun, human beings are seen as being integrated entities, in as much as it is taken as evident that:

- When you cultivate the spirit, it has an effect on mind and body
- When you nourish the mind this enriches the spirit and this will have influence on the body
- Nurture of the physical self will positively affect state of mind and the feeling of spiritual well being.

No line that makes up the YMCA’s symbolic triangle exists independently of the whole; if it did there would be no triangle, just three separate lines.

But all this doesn’t happen, or even start with a youth worker making a statement. It begins with the commitment of the individual, the giving of oneself to (a ‘peaceful submission’) which is premised on particular and definite set ideas, principles, beliefs and a faith. However, this faith is two way; it is faith in
God and in yourself as an expression of God. But there is a third line of faith that completes the triangle; faith in the young person having everything in them, that which is gifted them by God, to become all they can be. We need force nothing in, we only need to work with them to appreciate and so cultivate what it is that can bloom in and of them.

Such commitment requires constant effort and exercise of the will. It is not something that happens once and that’s it. But if it is practiced (as we saw with, for example, Elena and Muzaffer) what is produced in response to others becomes something unselfconscious and natural.

Every day faith is challenged and the will to continue in the faith is more or less strong or weak. Faith, to be faith, needs to be energised and renewed. As doubt is part of modern human existence it is an element of contemporary faith. This situation makes demands of those of us who take on faith as something that permeates our work and our lives. If you are a person of faith and never experience such demands it might be fair to ask yourself if you are living in denial, because they are everywhere and consistent. Our faith may well have answers but there are, every minute, more questions for us and our faith to answer, so faith itself is questioning. As such a requirement of faith is the gaining of knowledge and understanding of the world, of others and like Mr Said asked of us, of ourselves.

You might be able to see parallels here between the character of the practice of Muslim youth workers I have presented and some of the spirit of areas of Christian, and perhaps faith based youth work in general.

CONCLUSION

In the relatively little space I have tried to respond to some big issues. I feel I have not really be able to express very much about my subject. But I hope what I have written provides you with an example of what has become a passion of mine; the idea that we have only really touched the tip of the iceberg in terms of how Islam can refresh and humanise some of the more mechanistic aspects of youth work practice. Much of youth work has become infested with what often seems like purely economic aims and as such it is sometimes transformed into something instrumental, attuned to outcomes that in effect dehumanise us and even more so, those we work with. This undermines the certainty that these people are not objects to be moulded or changed by what we might see as our superior knowledge or experience, but the wonderful and multifaceted creations of God, who, as such, have a destiny only He ultimately can judge.
NOTES

1 A Muslim minority population of Bulgaria, whose members claim a variety of ethnic identities.

2 Bektashism is a Sufi order that encompasses Shi'ite concepts while sharing much with other Islamic mystical movements, e.g. the need for an experienced spiritual guide, the doctrine of the four gates to be traversed: the Shari'ah (religious law), Tariqah (the spiritual path), Ma'rifah (true knowledge), Haqiqah (reality). Bektashism places emphasis on the concept of Wahdat-ul-Wujood, the ‘Unity of Being’ that was formulated by Ibn Arabi.

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TAHIR ALAM

2. ENHANCING YOUTH WORK PRACTICE THROUGH THE CONCEPTS OF ISLAMIC MORALITY AND EDUCATION

Tahir Alam was born in Bangladesh in a small village in Sylhet. After arriving in the UK at a young age, up to the age of 11 he lived in Windsor. However, his family fell into unfortunate financial circumstances with the failure of his father business. Losing everything the family moved back to Bangladesh and stayed there for three years, at which time Tahir studied Bengali until the end of high school. His family later moved back to the UK and took residency in the rough suburbs of London.

Tahir grew up in inner London at a time of racial tension, this alongside the experience of deprivation and poverty, was a stark contrast to his former life in Windsor. As a young person and an adult Tahir has seen many changes to the political and social landscape of London and has first hand experienced of the issues associated with inequality and discrimination. He has navigated his way through the many pitfalls that can trip up a young person on their journey through life and set them up for failure.

As well as working by way of what he sees as ‘proactive engagement’ as a youth worker in various locations across London for the last ten years, Tahir is also an occasional speaker at his local Islamic cultural centre and has written about current affairs, social and political.

Tahir is a Tutor and Supervisor for the YMCA George Williams College and works as an Adult Education Development Officer for local government. He is currently finishing a Masters degree in the Sociology of Education at the Institute of Education, University of London and also continuing his studies in the Islamic Sciences, focusing on Philosophy of Islamic law and Prophetic Traditions with Dr Akram Nadwi from Oxford University.

INTRODUCTION

Over recent years the religion of Islam has become a major actor in the global public domain. However, rather than its central teachings of peace, justice, tolerance and harmony, to the horror of most Muslims, the faith is commonly associated with injustice, intolerance and injury. This negative perception, given

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currency by groups of Muslims who claim to follow the Islamic message, continues to perpetuate in the general understanding of Islam. They have obscured the image of ‘Islam’, a word that in its Arabic derivation means to be ‘at peace and to be safe’ (Lane: 1984: Vol 1, p1412).

However, those who look into Islamic teachings with an open heart will find clarity, and an invitation to justice and harmony. In this chapter I want to look at a few of the traditional understandings of one of greatest aspects of the Islamic message, the ennobling of good character embodied in the personage of The Prophet of Islam, Muhammad, of whom God clearly states in the Qu’ran; indeed your character is of a vast ethos (Qu’ran:2003, 68:4). I want to show how these teachings speak to us as youth workers in contemporary society. I will be referring to traditional Islamic teachings and agreed upon sources after the Qu’ran and Sunnah, presenting not just a classical, orthodox view of Islam. I will also include a fusion of contemporary understanding of youth work, and consideration of current thoughts on its practice and values. Although the contemporary models of youth work in its many styles and forms of delivery has much to offer in their different approaches, I feel there is a level of underlying concern as to the integrity of many of the current models, which appear to be based on and regulated by the norms of consumer society. As a result there appears to be a loss of faith in a metaphorical sense. This being the case, I hope the models derived from Islamic teachings might be helpful in the enhancement of current practice.

ISLAM AND YOUTH WORK

Before Youth Work and Islam there is almost no literature that explores the Islamic moral, ethical, spiritual, educational frameworks that can be employed in both Muslim and non-Muslim youth work. However, this title should not be read as a dichotomy. It has to be remembered that Islamic teaching is holistic in character; life is not separated exclusively into particular areas. Ideas of education, politics and diet for example are considered in the greater context of faith; everything is an expression of and connected to the whole. So from this perspective youth work in Islam is an expression and part of Islam.

However, Islamic values have the potential to bring a different perspective to youth work, something that most youth workers might agree is helpful and could facilitate new insights and interpretations to many of the prevalent models, which generally are secular in character or influenced by Christian thought. Indeed, Islamic perspectives from the Qu’ran, Hadith/Prophetic traditions or Islamic thought, can generally cater for the spread of understanding equanimity and harmony in human social interaction.

Throughout world history, across cultures and faiths people have valued the building of moral character and righteous conduct. Generations of philosophers, over thousands of years have sought to establish the nature of ethical behaviour
amongst and between human beings. Within this there has been an enduring belief that education will motivate and promote ‘the good’ and work to inculcate high moral standards in human character. While atheists and agnostics have ascribed moral laws and ethical behaviour to intelligent human construction, most civilisations throughout the ages have, at the centre of their social systems, a belief in a supreme being or beings, a Creator God or gods. Indeed, it is difficult to argue that the foundations of moral law have not, as part of humanity’s tradition and history, been founded on and laid down by religious doctrines, which have claimed divine authority and as such having a basis in infinite wisdom.

These essentially faith based principals, values and ideals have historically been transmitted and developed via intermediaries such as the Prophets, or as the manifestation of God as an embodiment of Christ or Avatars and framed within law. Muslims believe that moral laws and guidelines have been sent by God through the message of Islam and that there is no one who knows more about the affairs of the creation than our Creator. God says in the Qu’ran, *In the Law of Equality there is Life to you, O people of understanding* (Qu’ran:2003, 02:179). This verse makes clear the divine nature of the law and how it is fundamental to life. Muslims do not doubt that there is similar guidance in other revealed scriptures of other faiths, but take the Qu’ranic law as being the primary guiding principles in personal and social affairs.

**“IN THE NAME OF GOD THE MOST MERCIFUL, THE MOST COMPASSIONATE”**

Muslims repeatedly utter this phrase at the beginning of the day, when waking, eating, going out, buying, selling and generally starting something in the same way as God begins each chapter of the Qu’ran. As such this forms a sacred ritual in every day life. The words in Arabic *Ar-Rahmaan* (The Most Merciful) *Ar-Raheem* (The Most Compassionate, Qu’ran 1:1) are the superlative of the word *Rahma* or ‘mercy’, which are two attributes of God. Humans, it seems by necessity, want to imitate Godlike attributes, even if they only believe a notion of God as metaphor. ‘Power’, ‘authority’, ‘domination’, ‘knowledge’ all seem to be desirable to us in one way or another. However, as a whole we seem pay little heed to those attributes that seem to imply meekness in one’s character, especially in this age of rampant individualism, which can be understood to be, *the negation of any principle higher than individuality* (Guenon:1999, p71). But attributes like love, mercy, compassion and honesty offer a sense of contentment and fulfilment that cannot be found in material wealth alone. However these considerations are probably harder to acquire than wealth because they often entail some measure of sacrifice, tolerance, acceptance and/or a level of self restraint and selflessness. They are also the product of self-reflection and consideration for others.

As human beings we seem to have a basic need to embrace and be embraced by these attributes. As youth workers we need to express these, what are seemingly
inherently human, qualities if we are to be successful in our role as educators of and carers for young people. In fact, if you think about it, it would be hard to get anywhere with young people unless we were able to articulate these attributes effectively. I think it is more than a statement of faith to argue that the showing of care (for instance) to another has the potential to draw out care in those cared for. On a bland psychological level we do tend to mirror behaviour in relationships, so why not project our ‘better self’? The engendering of these qualities exalts the status of our being and, in reciprocation, that of others. This thus leads me to one of the most fundamental aspects of The Prophet Muhammad about whom God said in the Qu’ran We did not send you except as a Mercy to the whole of Creation (Qu’ran:2003, 21:107) and He, The Prophet, said about himself that, I was not sent except that I may perfect good character (Malik: 1991, p382).

As such it can be understood that moral teaching is at the heart and core of the Islamic tradition and one of the defining attributes the Prophet Muhammad mentioned in the Qu’ran. As God says in one verse; That indeed your character is of a great moral ethos (Qu’ran:2003, 68:4). His teachings, through his words and actions, have much to say to us about the spiritual nature of ourselves and our interaction with the whole of humanity. According to Hamza Yusuf, an eminent American Muslim scholar,

The Prophet’s words are as vital and relevant today as they were 1,400 years ago when they were first spoken. Whether you are a Muslim, a practitioner of another faith, or even someone who has no religious belief, these sayings have much to teach us. Sayings such as “A kind word is charity” and “Love for humanity what you love for yourself”, speaks to us regardless of our personal creed; they speak to our shared essential nature.” (Yusuf: 2005, p6)

COMMUNION

Human beings, throughout history, have found comfort, security and sanctity through communion and familiarity. Effective and caring communion requires a level of affection, acceptance, understanding, appreciation and sometimes tolerance. Communion offers a field effect of intimacy that invites us to be open and share our thoughts and feelings in sincere and giving manner;

Familiarization is a key ingredient in the cultivation of love. It is difficult to love someone you do not know (Shakir cited in Waley: 2007, p21)

The word ‘love’ has many meanings that imply different levels of affection. The love we have for a parent is different to the love we have for a friend or a spouse. Sometimes we say we love some material things, but this is not the level of love I might have for my child. But in our work we express the ethos of communion as care. The young people we work with share their time with us; they speak to us and, to a greater or lesser extent, let us into their lives. Often they find comfort and a sense of security in our very presence, sometimes coming by choice
(although for many youth provisions it is often the best option amongst a number of not very favourable options). This is an expression of a level of confidence in us. As such, it seems important to take the time and the effort to try to understand this articulation of feeling. It also seems useful to explore such belief in us and ethically appropriate to demonstrate a reciprocal level of belief in those who we effectively serve. In the contemporary era it is not unusual to hear those we work with and amongst referred to as ‘customers’ or ‘clients’; it is as if we are there to sell something them, or to ‘fix’ their lives. It is usual to hear young people defined as or as having some kind of problem or deficiency, but does this view really say more about our deficiencies? What makes us understand the complexity and wonder that is a young person as a form of deficit?

It seems to me that if we are unable to offer tangible expressions of care to young people (as people) that include an understanding of them as having the huge potential given to them as creations of God (rather than having an inherent lack) we provoke the wall of apathy (the great secret weapon/defence of youth) that many of us are so often confronted with. It is often claimed that youth workers are ‘role models’ and ‘examples’ to young people. This may or may not be true, but if we appear to young people as holding their contribution cheap, if we do not attend to them with a sense that we understand the honour that they give us by coming to us, we cannot really be surprised if they are defensive towards us, hold us and others in contempt or at least at keep us at arms length. The using of young people as a means to an end, to meet targets (youth workers so often talk about ‘using’ relationships) seems almost inherent in contemporary practice. But although we have to use the tools we are given and to some extent ‘who pays the piper calls the tune’, is it not our skill to humanise these instruments, to inject the life of communion into what we do that marks us out as ‘professional’? Practically this might be thought of as the use of professional judgement, spiritually it is perhaps the ability to see the light of God in those we work with.

KIND REGARD FOR OTHERS

The Islamic ideal is that when we meet others we should make the effort to draw affirmative regard from our first impressions (if you like, in the words of Johnny Mercer and Harold Arlen, as sung by Bing Crosby, we should ‘accentuate the positive’). This might perhaps be even more the case when we meet people that others have undermined or criticised (we focus on giving the benefit of the doubt). The ‘physics’ of this response is quite simple; it seems likely that if we give up on others they will give up on us and themselves. According to Islamic teachings, fostering a bad opinion of people just for the sake of it is considered a malady of the heart; …people are innocent until shown guilty (Yusuf:2004, p95). Even when someone is found guilty we might extend active forms of mercy, lend them a helping hand as Ibn Hazm says,
It is the height of injustice to deny a habitual wrongdoer the opportunity of doing an occasional good deed (Laylah: 1990, p137).

Islam teaches that when the self is moved to criticize others it is like a mirror in which you may be seeing reflections of your own shortcomings and as a human being, vulnerable to self deception, injustice and inequity, we can usefully try not to look in disdain at others.

Youth workers, and the literature surrounding the profession, often depict the young person as problematic and yet when we look back on our own youth, even youth workers realise that their behaviour and attitudes might have been similar to those they now regard as ‘difficult’. It seems that as adults we develop a kind of hypocritical amnesia that historically it is usual for the young not to be able, or to just plain refuse to conform to what might be seen as the norms of ‘adult society’. However, young people, more often than not, seem to need to learn by their own experience and not the warnings, counsel or advice of self proclaimed wiser adults.

Is it not part of the skill set of youth workers that we are able to embrace and even celebrate the non-conformist propensity of young people? Few (even the young) might disagree that we live in a society where we believe we can provide ‘quick fix’ solutions and put in place tough measures to prevent young people from making what we, as adults, determine to be errors and mistakes. This actually, quite ineffectively seeks to prevent young people treading similar learning routes that most of us have journeyed until we come to understand that we do not learn by our mistakes or even other people’s blunders, and that in fact it is much more usual to make the same mistakes over and over again until a crisis causes us to change. It is only after that point that we look back and realize we only understood situations by going through them ourselves and often we don’t understand the first time round. It is that understanding that we might see as an example of us practicing the mercy of God on ourselves. That we can go back; that we and others can rectify our behaviour based on our understanding is living the love of God. We tend to make lessons out of grief, fault, sorrow and crisis. As such they are not evils to avoid, but part of the course of our lives, experiences that can teach us that we are not perfect and so need to look elsewhere for peace and perfection (Eaton:2006, p37). If we believe it is possible to avoid mistakes on the strength of advice and warnings from youth workers, we would either be mad or be setting ourselves up as gods, which of course is the most foolish of blasphemies. ‘No one is perfect’ only God, therefore we must live and work with the situation that has been part of life for millennia; young people (and adults) learn by taking risks, making errors of judgement along the way.

From an Islamic perspective, there is a time for condemnation and punishment, but mercy outweighs demands for retaliation and revenge; forgiveness overrides the urge for retribution. In the Qu’ran, God gives both options; 

...tooth for tooth, and wounds equal for equal. But if any one remits the retaliation by way of charity, it is an act of atonement for himself (Qur’an:2003, 5:45).
This means that the act of forgiveness is a higher spiritual path to take and it reminds us that today’s sinner may become tomorrow’s saint. Many external factors threaten the human condition. The odds might be against us, and this is probably especially obvious to those of us who may need to experience life and view the lives of others in an effort to begin to understand the nature of reality. But one of greatest truths of our existence, one that causes us perhaps suitable humility before God, is the realisation that none of us will fully understand the nature of existence in our lifetime and that the best informed of us compared to the wisdom of God, know very little at all.

A profound lesson of living is that we need each other and it is in our best interests as individuals, groups, communities and society to strive to live in harmony and work to begin to see past our differences, shortcomings and biases. We need to experience all of these to be educated and to educate; education cannot by definition be a ‘one way’ process (else it is, at worst, brainwashing). In Islam we believe that God has created us as inherently good and the sound heart is understood to be free of character defects and spiritual blemishes (Yusuf: 2004, p1). That being the case, is it too much to ask or expect that we as youth workers try to resist seeing young people as ‘problems’, ‘difficult’ or by the light of some deficit model essentially created by remote authors, theorists, policy makers or academics? Can we see them as the glorious creations of God, with awe inspiring potential? I think we should be able at least to try to find and tread this path of rectitude naturally by listening to our hearts as well as those of others.

CONCLUSION

The above is not really advice or a means to ‘develop relationships’ with young people or people generally. Nor is it meant to be a means just to build ‘meaningful associations’ in the dealings of our social affairs. I have been writing about some moral qualities we might usefully pursue and aspire to perfect within our own selves. I firmly believe we need practice what we preach, and apply similar standards for ourselves and others. Doing otherwise defeats the object of honesty, integrity and trust that we as youth workers claim to build and spread amongst our fellow beings. The conduct of our character and the way we carry out our affairs rather than advice, warnings and endless questioning are the vehicles of change we have at our command. For Imam Ghazzali, the person seeking to be helpful cannot achieve this unless the model himself is reliable, because the person with bad morals cannot be a good influence (Usman: 1999, p9).

It may be us and not the labeled ‘trouble making’, ‘problem’ young person who suffers from a lack of morality in refusing to consider that young people are faced with a profusion of competing moral influences. We might try to develop an approach that allows us to consider not judging a young person who has made mistakes by their error. Indeed, if we talk to them we will likely find that they have
many moral codes of conduct that regulate relationships between themselves and the adults in their lives. Some, perhaps many of these codes are at odds with more traditional values and morality, but we can make an effort for some sort of reconciliation between ourselves. We may be called upon to define a new way of being, introducing different sides to the human character that can encompass what the person we are working with and for believes is ‘right’ and the rules, regulations, child protection and safety procedures, society demands we follow. Once more, I believe this to be part of our necessary skill set, premised on professional judgement.

In such a complex society, when the acts of people are defined by organisational parameters, who do we hold responsible? Organisations act, but they cannot be loved or blamed or touched (Eaton: 2006, p24). So are we to conform and become mechanical in our outward actions, following rigid rules? Although it can be said that structures are in place for our safety and well being, what is the cost of this? Does effectively suspending professional judgement, just merely doing as we are told risk a loss of our humanity, integrity, intimacy, our natural disposition to think, act and care?

Simple emotional physics might show us that unless we honour others we are unlikely get regard from them. A secondary consequence is that we will not get too far in our work with people. In honouring others we honour ourselves. The fulcrum of this is our own truthfulness, honesty and capacity for mercy. Appreciating and valuing others helps us avoid harming our own hearts and souls. We made the choice to be youth workers; to take up the sacred trust given us to care for other people’s children, and our choices and influence on others will spread out, as ripples spread from the stones tossed into a pool. The young people and people around us will undergo some changes as we change.

NOTES

1 In Arabic, the sunnah literally means ‘trodden path’. Therefore the sunnah of the Prophet means ‘the way of the prophet’. Terminologically, the word ‘Sunnah’ in Sunni Islam, means those religious actions that were instituted by the Prophet Muhammad during the 23 years of his ministry and which Muslims initially documented through consensus of companions.

2 The most important teachings that govern the life of Muslims after the Qu’ran are the Prophetic traditions: Or what is known and referred to in the Arabic as ‘Hadith’. The word ‘hadith’ literally means communication or narration. In the Islamic context it has come to denote the record of what the Prophet Muhammad said, did, or tacitly approved and also makes up the source of Islamic doctrine and law, after the Qur’an (www.eathalal.org/glossary.htm)

3 (Qu’ran:2003, 01:01)

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