Youth Work and Faith: Debates, Delights and Dilemmas

Mark K Smith, Naomi Stanton and Tom Wylie (Eds.), 2015

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This is a timely edited collection. The recent decline (or decimation) of state-funded youth work in the UK has given rise to a more visible and active faith-based youth work sector. As the editorial introduction to this volume powerfully notes, “by the early twenty-first century... more full-time youth workers were now employed in faith settings than secular ones” and that “there are many people ‘of faith’ who work in the ‘secular’ sector and, increasingly, vice versa” (p.1). This excellent book seeks to interrogate some of the implicit tensions, issues, debates, contradictions and doubts surrounding youth work and faith, and yet ultimately it contains an editorial call to *embrace* the contribution that the faith-based sector makes. It is not however a celebratory text. Indeed, the editors have crafted a book that remains critically reflexive and this is one of its clear strengths. The volume brings together authors that subscribe to a range of viewpoints and subject-positions and/or have studied diverse faith-based communities (Jewish, Christian, Muslim and inter-faith settings). Across eleven chapters, a number of thematic ideas are engaged with including dialogue, participation and reflection. Perhaps the book’s strongest theme is how the lines between the personal and professional are blurred in youth work contexts. This is articulated most powerfully in Bardy et al.’s chapter on the identities of youth work students and lecturers and how one can ‘steer a middle path’ between asking critical questions yet valuing the lived realities of those with faith. All the authors in *Youth Work & Faith* engage critically with debates that are often side-lined and ‘taboo’ subjects in relation to youth work practice. These include the role of the spiritual self (Green), motivations for entering the profession (Jolly), approaches to sex and sexuality (Page), death and dying (Bishop) and the place of values, beliefs and doubts in pedagogic practice (e.g. Davies, Harris, Bardy et al). Despite the different positionalities and beliefs held by contributors and/or the young people who they have researched, what unites all the chapters is a faith in the potential of youth work itself.

Another of the book’s strengths is the primacy given to the voices of practitioners and/or practice-led researchers. Whilst at times this can leave the reader wanting more in-depth analysis and methodological discussion within those chapters that do draw upon research projects, this approach has created a book that feels grounded in real-life youth work training contexts and reflective practice. It is also important to note in the context of a review for this journal that this book is not explicitly framed in relation to academic debates in children’s geographies. Yet there is much here for the children’s geographer to engage with: notably the discussion of identity and citizenship in Ahmed’s chapter on young British Muslims and Pimlott’s critical analysis of civil society and faith-based youth work since the advent of David Cameron’s vision for the ‘Big Society’. Overall, the themes the book engages with (religious identity, learning processes, informal education) are growing areas of interest within social and cultural geography. This book is therefore an important and welcome addition to inter-disciplinary scholarship on such debates.

Overall, *Youth Work & Faith* is clearly driven by the political and ethical impulses of the editors, who make a unifying call that faith-based and non-faith-based youth work are “stronger together than we are fragmented” (p.4). Whilst the topic of youth work and faith clearly provokes challenging questions, in the present climate of public sector cuts and disproportionate impacts affecting young people’s lives, it is hard to argue otherwise.

Sarah Mills
Department of Geography
Loughborough University