

Why young men from Tower Hamlets are going to fight in Iraq and Syria

'I see the powerlessness of the people here': a Catholic nun among east London's Muslims.

Sister Christine Frost on why young men from Tower Hamlets are going to fight in Iraq and Syria



Not so long ago disaffected youngsters would take to a life of crime and hard drugs, a trajectory which would often kill them. These days, some young men from our Muslim community sign up instead to the so-called Islamic State, and the dream of a distant Caliphate.

Why? Well, forget theology or even the prestige which comes from being a warrior — if Sister Christine Frost is right, it all comes down to housing.

Sister Christine has worked on the Will Crooks Estate in Poplar, east London, for over 40 years. She accidentally got into the news in early August when she removed the black flag of radical Islam which was flying over the entry to the estate, and the press were fascinated that a small, lone woman aged 77, would take such a risk. But if they believed Sister Christine to be a crusader against Islamism, then they got it all wrong. Sister Christine is a committed Christian of course, but if she is fighting on behalf of anyone, it is the disenfranchised, ghetto-ised Muslim youth she finds herself living alongside.

I met Sister Christine in the St Matthias Community Centre, where Christians once worshipped when the building was a church. Built in 1654 by the East India Company, it's the oldest building in Docklands. In the nave, large, lumpy white folk were preparing for a wedding reception, though the area is now largely Bangladeshi.

Poplar is in the borough of Tower Hamlets, where the Palestinian flag flies over the town hall and there is the highest percentage of Muslims in England. Sister Christine's patch also has the lowest proportion of Christians and there have been reports of Muslim patrols in the area threatening locals seen drinking, wearing short skirts, or looking overtly gay.

In recent weeks the tensions between 'them' and 'us' have got markedly worse, as it's come out that at least 20 young Britons a month are heading to Syria and Iraq to join terrorist groups. Ibn Hamdan al Bengali, 24, has stated on Facebook that he is a former student at Tower Hamlets College, just up the road from the St Matthias Centre.

But though Sister Christine deplors the jihadis, she also thinks we must address the real reasons it seems attractive to young Muslim men, which is that they feel victimised. 'It used to be mainly Pakistani youths who were radicalised,' she says, 'but now the Bengali youth are getting involved too. They feel themselves targeted and they become angry.' Sister Christine's point is that a feeling of persecution makes a young man ripe for radicalisation. The persecution complex began, she says, when Tony Blair led the UK into war in Iraq, but now it's mainly linked with Israeli attacks on Gaza. 'There is a sense of victimhood, and they have a narrow vision,' she says.

Jane Kelly - The Spectator