

AN ACCORD OF CAUTIOUS DISTANCE: MUSLIMS IN NEW ZEALAND, ETHNIC RELATIONS AND IMAGE MANAGEMENT

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The terrorist attacks in the USA of 11 September 2001 have tended to produce the consequence of problematising the presence of Muslims, most of whom are immigrants, in Western societies. The aftermath of these terror events has encouraged a revaluation in media and the popular press of Islam *per se*, and of Muslim groups living in the midst of Western host societies. In Europe there had already, prior to these events, emerged a strong sense of beleaguerment of Western culture through the “rising tide” of Muslim immigration, strengthening the popular appeal of right-wing political parties with a xenophobic agenda. Now the ever more entrenched and conspicuous presence of Muslims is producing features of “Islamophobia” (Vertovec and Peach 1997; Nielsen 1997; Husain and O’Brien 2000:1, 5; Hussain 2000:95-96). This distrust of Muslims is complemented by a sense of fear that Islam *per se* poses a threat to the West (see Esposito 1992:175) bringing to mind Huntington’s (1996) – hopefully not self-fulfilling – prophecy; a thesis which may be seen to express, on a sublimated academic level, just that Islamophobia.

This paper investigates the relationship between Muslims living in New Zealand, and in particular Muslims in the southern city of Dunedin, and the encapsulating host society.² This investigation, rather than being based on a

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² I wish to thank several Muslims for their friendship, information, and comments on various drafts of this paper. To spare them possible embarrassment through their becoming linked

study of empirically observable interaction patterns, is intended as a contribution to the study of perceptions and image formation, which leads to motivations for social action (in Max Weber's sense). The representation of cultural, or religious, otherness, and the careful construction of an "essentialised" self-identity and image of oneself – the two may not necessarily be identical – are agencies for and the result of interaction, and constitute factors relevant to this discussion.

Muslims in Western society are not just like any other confessional group with some specialised interests and needs. It is not just the strict and very detailed ortho-practical requirements of Islam, prescribing a certain way of life, which lifts Muslims out of mainstream, ordinary Western life, even under the best of integrative conditions. It is not the facts of interaction patterns but perceptions which become of paramount importance. Muslims face the necessity of careful image management to explain themselves as a rather visible immigrant group as well as adherents of a religious faith which traditionally never had a high repute in Western society and, aggravating the situation now, which has come under considerable suspicion of late. Not only do Muslims have to demonstrate the compatibility of Islam with parliamentary democracy (Esposito 1992:184-189) and human rights observance, correct the perception of oppressing women and of adhering to an inferior, Third World religion (Esposito 1992:201); now there is also the stigma of religious fundamentalism, fanaticism, and rabid anti-Western sentiments ascribed to Muslims wholesale to contend with. Islam has to a considerable extent been demonised by the media following the events of September 11, sensitising Muslims to the need to defend themselves as a group against the xenophobia and suspicion rife in the host society. They have to balance their desire to retain a strongly religion-based identity and distinctiveness, and to resist assimilation, with the need for acceptance in the host society and a minimum of integration. In order to be successful, a version of Islam has to be developed that not only unites them as believers, despite quite diverse ethnic backgrounds, but is also acceptable to the host society: this means constructing an image of themselves and their religion as "reasonable", sufficiently convincing to counteract a deep-seated negative image of Islam and populist

with any specific content or information contained in this paper, I shall not name them. I do, however, wish to acknowledge the assistance I received from two past Otago Muslim Organisation (OMA) presidents, Dr Mohammed Hassanin and Dr Fawzi Jadallah, in putting some of the resources of their organisation at my disposal; and also the acting OMA president Mr Steven Johnston *aka* Mohammed Ali al Akbar. The efforts of my temporary research assistant Taha el-Hassan in gathering information are also much appreciated. Mr Hidayat Brian McCormack, secretary of OMA, Mr Abdullah Drury of Federation of Islamic Associations of New Zealand (FIANZ), and Dr William Shepard placed information material at my disposal. I am indebted to an anonymous referee for constructive and informative comments. The data and information regarding "Muslim opinion", on which this paper is based, were gathered over a period of three years (1999 to 2002) with modest financial support from an Otago University grant. Gauging "Muslim opinion" was done by Taha and myself, mainly through informal interviews or only lightly structured interview methods, and networking techniques.

“Orientalism”, and the long-standing, ingrained disdain of Islam which has been exacerbated by recent vilification. Thus Muslim identity construction faces grave difficulties which need to be carefully negotiated: adjustment without loss of religious substance or commitment, constructing inner religious community cohesion, and acceptability to the host society.

This paper deals mainly with Muslims’ attitudes on the one hand, and, on the other, with public perceptions of Islam *per se* and of Muslims in New Zealand. Public or collective perception is, of course, a chronically elusive factor, difficult to gauge and describe. Here it is understood to be mainly represented and expressed by the media (see, for instance, Hussain 2000:98-100), given voice in newspaper columns, media reporting on Islamic issues, and, of course, through “official” statements by the government and remarks from political circles; and, as far as the Muslim side is concerned, by statements and views of the leadership. (No opinion survey was undertaken to gauge mainstream society’s views, nor were individual views scanned). The construction of opinions at large on any issue on this basis of course tends to ignore extreme, radical positions (racism, religious intolerance, fanaticism, etc.) and fails to explore their origins. Yet, it does give a fairly representative picture of the general situation.

Clifford Geertz’s comments about the writings of anthropologists pertain, to a high degree, to an analysis of this kind: they are “themselves interpretations, and second- and third-order ones to boot. (By definition, only a ‘native’ makes first order ones: it’s *his* culture.) They are, thus fictions; fictions, in the sense they are ‘something made’, ‘something fashioned’ – the original meaning of *fictio* – not that they are false, un-factual, or merely ‘as if’ thought experiments ...” (Geertz 1973:15). I myself am nearly equidistant from both sides involved in this analysis: not belonging to either the Muslim community nor being deeply rooted in the centrality of dominant society, namely that which is of Anglo-Celtic provenance. If writing anthropological fiction indeed creates a handicap for that which it describes, my description imparts that handicap equally to both sides.

Muslims in New Zealand

The Muslim community in New Zealand is relatively small when compared with immigrant Muslim communities in other Western nations such as USA, France, Britain, and Germany. According to the latest census figures (of 2001) there were 23,631 Muslim residents in New Zealand.³ The majority arrived as migrants, with only a minority actually born in this country. (In European countries, Muslim numbers have in recent decades been swelled considerably by the immigrants’ offspring, who are citizens by virtue of birth and are linguistically and educationally assimilated). There is only a small

³ Information sent out by FIANZ in March 2002 would suggest the number to be somewhat higher.

proportion of New Zealand converts (of Western background).⁴ Even so, the present number represents a steep increase on the past situation; when compared, for example, with the 1996 census, which recorded 13,545 Muslims resident in the country. In the 1980s, there were no more than a mere 2,000 (cf. Shepard 1985:181). Muslims are of various and quite diverse ethnic background and national origin, which brings of course its own problems of forging a common ground of worship, communication, and coordinating religious interests and predilections. Multi-ethnicity also makes the formation of a tight-knit organisational structure encompassing the social and political interests of all Muslim residents much more difficult.

In the multi-ethnic mix of New Zealand society, Muslims are not prominent. Although well organised in a nation-wide umbrella organisation, FIANZ (Federation of Islamic Associations of New Zealand), and several smaller, especially regionally based organisations (such as OMA: Otago Muslim Organisation, MSYANZ: Muslim Students and Youth Association of New Zealand, MUSA: Muslim Student Association of Otago University), New Zealand's Muslims are politically inconspicuous. FIANZ's main function appears to be to establish communication among Muslims and to advise on spiritual matters by exercising theological leadership through the presence of an appointed board of *ulema* who are entitled to issue *fatwa* (rulings). (However, not unusually, regional organisations, in seeking advice, go beyond that representation to Islamic experts overseas, some of whom run convenient websites and answer services (cf Kolig 2001 on the issue of prayer times)). The board consists of seven *imam*, who have to hold a university degree in *shari'a* (Islamic theology/law) and lead the congregation of New Zealand's seven major mosques.

The inconspicuousness of New Zealand Muslims in the nation's political discourse is in contrast, for instance, to British Muslims and their "growing determination ... to find a political voice" (*The Economist* 1991:47). British Muslims in the Rushdie affair vociferously demanded a restriction of free speech in matters of blasphemy (Jones 1990) and have meanwhile formed a Muslim parliament (*New Statesman* 1991:14-15; see also Khan 2000:39 about British Muslims' involvement in politics, elections and lobbying; and Vertovec and Peach 1997 on the general European situation). Lobbying by New Zealand Muslims is either ineffective or non-existent and, in the political process, Islam plays virtually no role.⁵ A Muslim recently elected to

⁴ In a BA honours dissertation C. Hill (2001) states that "a significant number of New Zealanders have embraced Islam" (p.2) and proceeds (on p.6) to give a number of between 250 to 300. Abdullah Drury (pers.comm.), information officer of FIANZ, places his estimate at 300 to 500 converts. Exact figures presumably are impossible to give as some may be drifting away again after first contact or fail to become integrated into the community of worshippers.

⁵ Shepard (1980:158) twenty years ago also remarked on the lack of political involvement of New Zealand's Muslim community. Little seems to have changed since. In a recent publication he (2002:238) reiterates this view. The successes in lobbying are rare, such as blocking the screening of the film "Death of a Princess" (see also Shepard 2002:242). In

parliament as a list MP is on record for carefully separating Islam from politics, in line with secularised New Zealand's state-church separation. He does not see his role as adding an Islamic voice to the parliamentary process.

However, religious and ethnic tolerance assures Muslims of a quietly accepted, albeit not hugely respected, place in the country. At the moment, at least, it would be unthinkable for New Zealand politicians to make a comment like that of Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, who was reported recently in the European media to have remarked on "Western civilisation's superiority over Islam". This remark drew a sharp rebuke from French politicians presumably worried about good relationships with France's four million Muslims. Nor would New Zealand politicians be likely to make statements resembling those of the Dutch politician Pim Fortuyn's diatribes against Muslim immigration and his claims that Islam is a "backward culture". Equally unimaginable would be something like the Honeyford incident in Britain in 1983, when a school headmaster denounced Muslim immigrant children as inferior, and was rewarded for it by the then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (Afshar 1998:110, Lewis 1997:111).

Criticism directed at Muslim immigration is indirect, such as when the leader of one of the smaller political parties represented in parliament castigated immigration/refugee policy for allowing entry to New Zealand of too many people of "alien culture", people who then experience difficulties in assimilating (*Radio New Zealand News* 29 Jan. 2002). Apparently this politician then expanded his remarks, speaking of refugees as coming from a "desert culture" to "one of the wettest countries on earth". (The reference, according to the news bulletin, was to Somalis). Instead, he maintained, New Zealand should more sensibly be taking people like white Zimbabwean farmers driven off their land. The references to Muslims and Islam contained in such remarks are cryptic and, therefore, if brought to a point, could easily be denied.⁶ Another "populist" politician did label Muslims "a risk" to the country (*The Otago Daily Times* 16/5/02 p.2), although it is considered politically incorrect to do this, and to argue for restrictions on Muslim immigration or accepting refugees, even after the events of 11 September. (Of course, in this debate it needs to be borne in mind that not all Muslims arrive as refugees and ordinary migrants are vetted as to their social "usefulness"). It must be considered equally atypical when a business paper (*The National Business Review* of 5 October 2001 p.1 and 3), in the aftermath of 11 September, accused the *imam* of Hamilton, Anwar Sahib, a Fijian by origin and a graduate of al Madina University, of having terrorist links. In the same article, it was hinted that fundraising among the country's Muslims would benefit the coffers of Al-Qaeda. These allegations and their innuendo of

this case this was probably the intervention of Saudi Arabia rather than the weight of the New Zealand Muslim community.

⁶ Apparently, "a Muslim group", unidentified by the media, took offence at these remarks, construing them as anti-Muslim, and lodged a complaint with the Race Relations Conciliator (*The Otago Daily Times* 31/1/02 p.2). From information received, it was apparently not FIANZ.

terrorist involvement were so extraordinary – obviously the product of the climate of frenzied search for culprits immediately after the terrorist attack, and beyond anything normally vented in the New Zealand media discourse – that they received no further attention. After the terrorist event in Kuta, Bali, (in October 2002), and following police raids on Indonesian Muslims living in Australia and suspected of links with Jemaa Islamiya, the New Zealand government has distanced itself from such treatment towards Muslim citizens.

Despite a general acceptance of Muslims and a conspicuous absence of hostilities, a cautious and usually benevolent distance, observed as if by tacit agreement by both sides (Muslims and the majority wider society), separates Muslims from non-Muslims. In an unpublished paper, Shepard (n.d.: 12) glosses New Zealand Muslims as “not well integrated”. Although “ghettoisation” does not seem to be an imminent problem, as it may be in parts of Europe, relationships do invite an analysis and interpretation. Mutual perceptions seem to support a cautious distance and since it is maintained on a voluntary, non-institutionalised basis by both sides, the question arises on what grounds this is so. Ethnic and cultural tolerance, which dictates social intercourse in New Zealand society, in the main, ensures that Muslims do not suffer discrimination, but does not prevent occasional acts of harassment and abuse from occurring (cf. Shepard n.d.:10 and 2002: 237). In addition to a general, broadly-based, laissez-faire tolerance of humanity of all kinds, New Zealand’s hegemon which, through advanced secularisation, has seriously eroded and undermined the once predominant status of the main Christian denominations (of Anglicanism, Presbyterianism, Catholicism, and Methodism), now affords a benign tolerance and freedom of worship and belief to all religions, even so-called “cults” or New Religious Movements, as long as they operate within the confines of secular law.⁷ New Zealand is in fact a society which rejects its own traditional religiosity and does so, in the name of political correctness, conspicuously, at times, when it seems that (white) Christianity might overshadow other faiths.⁸ Only Māori spirituality, on the basis of the official policy of Biculturalism, which gives official recognition and protection to the indigenous Māori culture (or what is designated as such), enjoys a privileged status and receives state support on occasions (see, for example, Kolig 2000). In these cases, religious beliefs are classified as part of “Māori

⁷ For instance, the Korean leader/pastor of a small fringe Christian sect was brought before court and sentenced in late 2001. His crime: in the attempt to exorcise demons from a parishioner, he killed her and for days afterwards attempted a resurrection by way of fervent prayer over the decaying body. While freedom of worship of any kind is informally, if not constitutionally, guaranteed and soteriological or magical expectations for miracles to occur, practices of exorcism and the like are not against the law. Acts against life and liberty, uncommon cruelty, drug and child abuse etc., which collide with the criminal penal code, come under the jurisdiction of secular law.

⁸ A characteristic occurrence was in 1996, when a dispute erupted over whether kindergarten teachers should be teaching children about the Christian meaning of Easter and whether indeed they should be handing out to the children hot-cross buns, a traditional Easter-fare, because they displayed the Christian symbol of the cross. Some argued that doing so would be giving offence to children of other faiths.

culture”, and in this sense come under official protection in a society which otherwise scrupulously separates religion and state.⁹

As a rule, New Zealand Muslims feature relatively rarely in the print and electronic media, which is in contrast to the coverage Islam and the Islamic world receives. When they do, the media tend to take a sympathetic and accommodating stance. This is not so in matters concerning the Islamic World or Islam in general, particularly in the aftermath of 11 September. Not surprisingly, Muslims do complain now about prejudicial and unpleasant behaviour which they encounter at times from members of the public, despite – as we shall see – generally benevolent views vis-à-vis New Zealand Muslims expressed in the media. Many I spoke to have experienced episodes they term harassment and, by and large, they place the blame on the prejudicial portrayal of Islam and Islamic matters in the media. In fact, Muslims do not share the view, widely held in the host society, that the media are relatively unbiased towards them.¹⁰ But one must distinguish more finely. Their main complaint is about unfair treatment by the media in matters concerning universal Muslimhood and political matters concerning the Islamic world in general which they tend to perceive as extending by implication to them personally. For instance, in the case of the Palestinian cause, in the view of Arab migrants, the Israeli viewpoint is much better represented and given much more gravity than the Arab or Islamic view, thus inevitably and chronically tipping public perception and sympathy in favour of the Israeli position. Understandably, those Muslims who are of Palestinian origin link such matters very strongly and inextricably to their persons and their existence in New Zealand, and feel that they themselves are implicated in this unfavourable picture of the Palestinian struggle. However, on the other hand, they do acknowledge that New Zealand media seem not to be biased against the Muslim minority living in this country.

New Zealand society and Orientalism

As Pedersen (1998:171) points out, it is customary by now for any writing on Islam in the West to make its obeisances towards Said’s “hegemonic text” on Orientalism. It is a style of thought which represents and uses an asymmetrical ideological relationship, between the West and that designated as ‘Oriental’; and, expressive of domination, is replete with innuendoes of power arrogated and relentlessly exercised by the West. In short, it is a discursive formation in

⁹ In mid-2001, a member of parliament spoke out against state-funding for Māori *kaumatua* and *tohunga* (elders and experts) to enable them to travel to places in the world where official building or offices (such as embassies, high commissions, etc) were to be inaugurated, in order for them to perform traditional rituals to exorcise spirits or lift *tapu*. “I believe there’s a separation between Church and State”, he is quoted as saying, *The Otago Daily Times* 14/7/2001 p.3.

¹⁰ Little seems to have changed since the 1980s, when Shepard (1980:158) briefly remarked on this.

the Foucauldian sense, while yet retaining a flavour of the one-sided nature of power relations – all power relations – conceived by the traditional Marxist view.

[Orientalism] depends for its strategy on the flexible *positional* superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand ... Additionally, the imaginative examination of things Oriental was based more or less exclusively upon a sovereign Western consciousness out of whose unchallenged centrality an Oriental world emerged, first according to general ideas about who or what was an Oriental, then according to a detailed logic governed not simply by empirical reality but by a battery of desires, regressions, investments, and projections (Said 1978: 7-8).

[Orientalism is an instrument for] dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorising views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism [is] a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient... (Said 1978:3).

These features are well enough displayed by the media, public opinion, and in political comments. As far as the Islamic world is concerned, moral judgments are made from a high ground which admits to no hesitation or understanding for the relativity of such positions. Relationships, of any kind, between the West and the Islamic world remain unexamined as to their effect on the cultural other, in fact, this other is rarely examined, except when highlighting its imputed inferiority in some respect or other. The discourse is one of unreflected and very one-sidedly rationalised domination.

However, several scholars have since voiced weighty criticism of Said's concept (for a summary cf. Pedersen 1998), among them Sahlins' witty dictum (1996:21) that some things would be "better left un-Said". While most of these are valid critiques, Orientalism is still a useful concept as a shorthand reference, a slightly hyperbolic and generalised summary of a discourse, historically tangible and of considerable academic and political consequence. Somewhat ambivalently, while it continues to exist in practical, political, and economic matters, it has meanwhile in more intellectual circles been largely supplanted by a self-reflective, self-conscious, and at times self-flagellatory Western *Zivilisationskritik* (see Gellner 1992). This now forms an integral part of post-modernist discourse, from which members of the Western media cannot stay aloof, despite their natural propensity to adhere to Orientalist attitudes. This is so for several reasons: Western society as a whole is vitally influenced by post-modernism nurtured by an inner ideological reform in the post-colonial era; and also because of a Third- and Fourth world-driven discourse which the Western hegemon cannot ignore. This latter discourse, taking its cues from Western post-modernism, has absorbed the notion of the existence of Orientalism in Western, dominant society and of the need to resist it as an evil ideological source. While it remains ostensibly unaware that once

again it is adopting a Western ideological stance and falling under the spell of it, it manages adroitly to make it the basis of its own claim for power by playing on the West's bad conscience.

New Zealand society shows both trends – post-modernist self-consciousness and even self-denigration as well as Orientalist leanings – in considerable clarity. The reasons, I think, are manifold. For instance, both the need to accommodate the views of a sizeable indigenous ethnic minority (Maori who form c.15 % of the total population) and a traditional cultural self-deprecation vis-à-vis the “mother country” (Britain) lend support to post-modernist and anti-colonialist tendencies. A lingering sense of superiority vis-à-vis the sea of brown people surrounding the country supports Orientalist leanings. In the case of Islam, of course, the New Age tolerance, even respect, for other than traditional Western forms of religiosity also plays a role. It results in the willingness to give religious otherness the space for separate identity, while on the other hand not going out of its way to create that space through institutional change beyond mere informal good will and tolerance.¹¹

The media express well this ideological bi-polarity. On the one hand, the portrayal of Islam and the Islamic world in general is largely informed by Orientalism (in the form of a rather one-sided moralism and sense of superiority). This entails a leaning towards associating Islam with radicalism, militantism, and fanaticism – ascribing to Islamic fundamentalism the face of Osama bin Laden, which needless to say is a gross caricature of reality. On the other hand, the treatment Muslims living in New Zealand receive is relatively benign and largely informed by New Age religious tolerance. I shall give a number of what I think are characteristic examples of the recent past, some of them dating from after the 11 September 2001 terrorist attack.

Early in 2001, for instance, a Muslim family, living in Hastings, complained vociferously about a pizza delivered to them. While their order had been for a vegetarian product, they discovered, after they had eaten it, that bacon had been obscured beneath the cheese. From the family's viewpoint, which they proclaimed loudly, their religious sensitivities had been trampled on by the food company's carelessness. As a result of this misadventure they had broken one of the strongest Islamic interdictions: the consumption of pork is specifically prohibited and made *haram* in Qur'an *sura* 2/173 and 5/3 (“Forbidden to you are: [carrion], blood, the flesh of swine”). The family was ostensibly incensed at having made themselves unclean, though unwittingly so, and thus had been induced to commit a terrible sin. Newspapers reported the incident and a popular domestic news and chat show on television (“The Holmes Show”) interviewed the head of the aggrieved household; as well as giving a brief follow-up on the story at a later date. The media treatment was generally sympathetic towards the family's plight, despite

¹¹ In some European countries, Islam has been formally recognised as an official religion, enjoys state support in the education system, Islamic practices (for instance, *halal* food, observance of *ramadan*) have been incorporated into the armed forces, and *sharia* courts have been given jurisdiction in some matters (for instance, with regard to family and inheritance laws).

the fact that *halal* food prescriptions to the average New Zealander seem quaint at best and foolish and bigoted at worst. The pizza company's contrition about the error – compounded and no doubt made more sincere by the resulting bad press – was obvious. *The Otago Daily Times* (18/7/01 p.3) prefaced an article on this issue with “slow to apologise” referring to the company's presumed reluctance to own up to their mistake, despite the fact that the manager previously had publicly and profusely apologised on TV. The benevolent media tone did not waver, even when the family claimed that an apology and replacement of cost were not enough and that compensation was due them in the form of a fully paid trip to Mecca for the whole family (reportedly, 5 persons), so that they could cleanse themselves of their sin. (In the end, the demand for a trip to Mecca for the whole family to purify themselves, was apparently not met, but some smaller compensation was offered and accepted). Subsequently, Muslim authorities came out denouncing this compensation claim as exaggerated, pointing out that a sin unknowingly committed is no sin and that purification could be done in ways other than through a trip to the holy shrine of Mecca. Even though a close reading of events would have raised suspicion about the family's motives in involving the media and raising this kind of compensation demand, the media generally did not cast aspersion on this family or Islam *per se*. Sympathy did not waver, despite a strong whiff of extortion-like and fraudulent opportunism emanating from the family's claim. In fact, it seems to me that a sense of fair-mindedness caused the media to accommodate and portray sympathetically the Muslim point of view. While the media treatment of the family's seemingly unreasonable and theologically unsupported demand was presumably inspired to some extent by a nonchalant, and somewhat condescending curiosity about such quaint food taboos and outlandish religious customs, it could hardly be disputed that to some extent it was occasioned by a genuine fair mindedness and cultural tolerance extended by a highly secularised society to something which only with a good deal of naive benevolence might be construed to be religiously motivated anguish.

When, a few years ago, in 1998, unknown assailants torched a mosque in the city of Hamilton, again reportage was overwhelmingly favourable towards Islam, extolling the virtues of religious freedom and the rights of minorities. Moreover, there was apparently strong local authority and public support for the Muslim community to rebuild the mosque. Donations and practical support from city and private individuals came to the rescue. Shepard (2002:237-238) remarks: the event showed “New Zealand at both its worst and its best,” and “one Muslim leader has commented that [it] ..showed them how many friends they have”.

The so-called “Tampa affair” again also revealed a kind of benevolence towards Muslims by New Zealand's political circles, in which this country stood out among Western nations. (Only Norway made a similar move, albeit somewhat later than New Zealand). In August and September 2001, (mainly) Afghan and (some) Iraqi refugees (about 400 men, women, and children), who had been rescued from a sinking Indonesian boat in international waters

between Indonesia and Australia by the Norwegian freighter Tampa, in an astonishing standoff between the Australian government and the ship's captain, were denied entry into Australia. These Muslim families were would-be immigrants to Australia who had paid "people-smugglers" to take them illegally to their destination. They were not prepared, as the Australian government paraphrased it, to go through the ordinary channels of immigration; they were "queue-jumpers". They were denounced as "illegal refugees", thus attaching the innuendo of criminality to their status as refugees and in fact stripping them of this status. They were to be made an example of in order to deter further such attempts. Apparently the problem of refugees arriving "uninvited" by boat is rife and the Australian government felt it had to take a stance in this matter. While much of the rest of the world and international organisations condemned Australia's intransigence, but practically offered little assistance, the New Zealand government hastened to offer to take 150 of the refugees and subsequently selected 142 to accept into the country. (In a later news bulletin the figures were revised to 700 refugees on the ship of whom 131 were accepted into New Zealand). In stark contrast to Australian society, where the Australian government's stern refusal to admit the refugees, who "had tried to jump the queue", led to the government's popularity soaring and, if one believes political pundits, helped the incumbent government to win re-election, generally attitudes, officially expressed, were the reverse in New Zealand. They seemed favourable towards offering asylum at least to some of the refugees – this was, one should remember, after 11 September 2001 when anti-Islamic attitudes reached a peak in the West. Only one parliamentarian and leader of a minor party came out strongly against this move, claiming – perhaps somewhat incongruously – that there was enough poverty at home to occupy the government's largesse.

Islam in the city of Dunedin

The data on which this paper primarily rests are of a fairly localised nature and my face-to-face encounter with Muslims in New Zealand stems mainly – but not exclusively – from the southern city of Dunedin where I carried out most of my fieldwork. (Information was also obtained through contacts with Muslims elsewhere, allowing a certain degree of generalisation). Muslims in this city (with a resident population somewhat over 100 000) had no safety concerns immediately after 11 September. Despite their small number, local Muslims form a vibrant and relatively cohesive community which is religiously very active with many *dawah* programmes and initiatives to keep the spirit of Islam alive in an alien social environment (see e.g. Kolig 2001) and also to present a benign image of Islam to the host society.¹²

¹² As an anonymous referee has pointed out, the Dunedin community may be more harmonious and irenic than other local communities elsewhere in New Zealand, where for instance Sunni-Shi'i tensions were considerable in the 1990s. Such sectarian differences do in fact also exist in the Dunedin community, but in the past do not seem to have led to

Dunedin's Muslim community numbers between 400 to 600 persons. Many of them are, however, itinerant students studying at the University of Otago. (The immediate past president of OMA, Mohammed Hassanin, thought that in fact numbers have declined in recent years as fewer Malaysian students are now coming to attend Otago University. Malaysians had formed the largest ethnic contingent in the past). When students leave for holidays, the Muslim population falls drastically.

Far from being provincial, this city, chiefly through the presence of a university and a proportionally and comparatively large sector of academics and highly educated, professional people, leans towards an open-mindedness and cultural tolerance which is not usual for similar-sized places. The official New Zealand policy of Biculturalism (giving equal and official status to both Anglo-Celtic or Pakeha culture, and to Māori culture) assumes more of a multi-cultural character in this city. The city's administration, looking with detached benevolence on all resident ethnic and religious minorities (for instance, the Buddhist community; see Kolig 1997), seems to consider Muslims a colourful addition to the city's multi-national and cosmopolitan flavour. Its one and only daily newspaper, *The Otago Daily Times*, on the whole maintains some benevolent interest in local Muslims, devoting to them articles at occasions such as *ramadan*, *Eid al Adha*, Islamic Awareness Week, the opening of the local mosque, and the like.¹³

The peace of tranquil relations is rarely disturbed. One such exceptional episode happened in 1996, through a faux pas by the mayor, Mrs Sukhi Turner, who, in a speech to the "Friends of the (town's) library", referred to the Alexandria library conflagration of the year 640 AD, which was understandable in the context. However, rather undiplomatically, she blamed the arson as an act of vandalism on "the armies of Allah", declaring "Arab warriors" as "the enemies of civilisation" (speech published in *Library Lines*, Dunedin Public Libraries, January-February 1996).

Both OMA and FIANZ lodged complaints in writing demanding a formal apology. A complaint was also laid with the Race Relations Conciliator. A contrite Mrs Turner (who is, incidentally, a person of Indian origin and of Sikh religious background) apologised profusely in letters to both organisations and in a published statement in which she declared: "I wish to clarify that I

vociferous disagreements. However, in another sense the Dunedin community is somewhat atypical: the relatively high proportion of a mobile student contingent. For the issues raised in this paper such local differences are of relatively minor import. Local communities everywhere in New Zealand are faced basically with the same problems and tend to respond in the way outlined in this paper.

¹³ On the opening of the mosque al Huda, *The Otago Daily Times* 21/12/00 p.4; Islamic Awareness Week 24/9/99 p.3; Eid al Adha 6/5/1996 p.5; *Ramadan* 17/11/01 p.A5 and 10/1/1997 p.6, to mention only a small sample of articles and reports on the local Muslim community. Across the board, these write-ups use a positive and cordial tone. One gets the impression that they are designed not only to display goodwill, but also to show the cosmopolitan character and world-open sense of the city.

harbour no animosity towards New Zealand Muslims or the religion of Islam” (*Library Lines* April 1996).¹⁴

The mosque al Huda (‘divine guidance’) was opened early in 2001 in an area closely adjoining the university campus and, in fact, forming part of the general university precinct. Again, the local daily newspaper (*The Otago Daily Times*) as well as a weekly community paper (*The Star Midweek*) reported in a positive and friendly way on the event. No problems with the mainly student neighbourhood were experienced, other than the routinely somewhat loose behaviour of inebriated youngsters creating noise and rubbish and seeking out the mosque grounds for the odd secluded spot to relieve themselves. These events are probably more opportunistic and indicative of the generally exuberant behaviour of students, rather than being intended to offer a calculated insult to Muslims or Islam. Following the events of 11 September, some encounters were somewhat more abusive but certainly not life threatening: some hate mail was received and some Muslims suffered verbal abuse.

A local Muslim leader, a Palestinian, once commented to me that Muslims feel freer here to practice Islam than in many places in the so-called Islamic world (or in marked contrast to some European countries, one might add, where Muslims complain about intolerance and practical obstacles to live as Muslims; see, for instance, Pedersen 1996:206). In his view, while in Dunedin no one pays any attention, in Muslim countries an all-too regular attendance at the mosque may be considered a sign of undesirable fundamentalist leanings or fanatical over-commitment. Ostentatious piety is likely to raise suspicion in both liberal Islamic and autocratic regimes alike, he meant to say, for its perceived link with political agitation. One would have to exempt from this assessment, of course, Iran or Taleban Afghanistan, where until recently a showing of piety was mandatory. In New Zealand “no one cares or interferes”, he thought. Freedom of religion and a practically laissez-faire multi-culturalism, insisting only on a certain degree of assimilation and integration, seem to be the cornerstones of New Zealand’s attitude to migrant Muslims.

In the past, relations were unmarred by the kind of frequently tense relations experienced in some European countries, where some well-publicised cases tended to polarise the host society and Muslims and their sympathisers. For instance, the spectacular Rushdie affair caused ructions, mainly in the UK, the consequences of which have not yet completely subsided. The so-called “head-scarf affair” in France (see Esposito 1992:176), at about the same time, had a similar effect of sharply splitting the Muslim minority from the host society. Prior to the attempted bombing of the World Trade Centre and then, of course, its final destruction in the attack on 11 September 2001, no Muslim radicalism had made as much mark on a Western country as was the case in France. New Zealand seems a long way away from such ructions. During the

¹⁴ Mrs Turner is in fact a patron of the Dunedin Jewish-Christian-Muslim Community Liaison Group, which was formed in 2001 to create an interdenominational and united front against religious harassment. See, for instance, *The Otago Daily Times* 13/3/02 p.6).

oil shock period in the 1970s, bumper stickers did appear, exhorting people to “burn an Arab a day”, but that seemed like a passing and minor aberration in the usual mild-temperedness in the New Zealand emotional landscape. No one tried to emulate the suggestion. And in any case, this “campaign” was not directed at Islam *per se*.

This is not to say that Dunedin’s Muslims do not find reason to complain about unbalanced reporting of issues concerning the Islamic world. But here the cause lies with the uncritical take-over of copy material from major news networks and the biases it contains. Not surprisingly, this is usually attributed to Jewish or Zionist influences prevailing in major news systems.

Some incidents on campus giving offence to Muslims, one surmises, arose more from thoughtlessness than from intent to cause offence. In other words, it is more for reasons of ignorance than malice that the student body or individual students were at times giving offence, which in the past invariably led to retractions and apologies to the local Muslim organisations (the OMA and the MUSA). When the student newspaper *Critic* issued a “Sex Mag” in 2000, it contained some “information” which was meant to be tongue-in-cheek, but in fact turned out to be offensive to Muslims, by alluding to Muslim and Arab sexual practices in a factually untruthful and slanderous way. The editor quickly met the complaints from MUSA and OMA with retractions and profound apologies. A year later, student body elections produced a poster referring to “fundamentalists” in conjunction with three bearded, Taleban-style figures. Again, protests were raised by Muslim students and apologies issued. These episodic discords are not expressions of anti-Islamic feelings by university students, but arise out of ethnocentrism and genuine ignorance of sensitivities in other cultures. My approach to the editor of “Sex Mag” to ask for her reasons for offering this insult to Muslims, while presumably she would have avoided insulting Māori cultural sensitivities, was met with the bland, but presumably sincere, answer that she was very much aware of Māori sensitivities but knew nothing about Islam. Her apology seemed to be sincere, if not because of having caused anger and anguish among Muslims, then certainly because of having put the student paper in disrepute. More importantly, her explanation seemed to me to be characteristic of the general awareness of Islam in New Zealand: it is so remote that the very idea that Muslims may harbour sensitive spots does not seem to enter many people’s consciousness.

Even after the events of 11 September 2001 in New York and Washington DC, the situation did not change drastically. Some minor police investigations for which the officially given reason was to be informed in case protection for local Muslims would be necessary (but in reality may have had other reasons), had the effect of arousing suspicion in the local Muslim community that they were being spied on. Although the occasional insult and cheeky comment was registered by the community, no physical attacks on Muslims or their property were recorded.

Constructing a “reasonable” Islam

The New Zealand Muslim community, in trying to construct a common identity for themselves, also has to bear in mind that it is necessary to present an image of Islam as a “reasonable” religion, now more so than ever, to allay fear and suspicion in the host society. If self-identity and the image to be presented to the host society are not to be different, the Muslim leadership is faced with the need to renounce religious features which may be considered bizarre by the host society and above all to denounce anything that smacks of fundamentalist tendencies or fanaticism.

In a sense, Dunedin and its Muslim community can be seen to represent a microcosm of the nation-wide situation. The community is heterogenous in its ethnic composition (with community members coming from 29 different countries), as well as in denominational terms.¹⁵ The construction of a common identity, preserving origin and background, but stressing new commonalities, is therefore of vital importance (see, for instance, Barth 1969:13). The construction of a discourse of a pan-Muslim identity is a complex and multi-faceted affair. The discourse must be predicated on a profound rethinking of the fundamentals of the faith, and thus the formation of an internationalised (or at least de-nationalised), Western-adjusted Islam will be facilitated (even though responses to globalisation may be quite opposed to each other; see below).

A Muslim immigrant identity, therefore, is very strongly based on religious considerations rather than on geographic, ethnic, or linguistic criteria (see also Husain and O’Brien 2000:4). The valorisation of Islam, however, necessitates a rethinking of its dogmatic principles to develop a truly shared identity based on a New Zealand brand of Islam (see Bartels 2000:63-64 on “Dutch Islam” and Naguib 2002:168-169 on the development of a “Norwegian-Scandinavian character” of Islam). The prophetic words of the British Islamic leader, Zaki Badawi, are characteristic of this tendency:

Our adjustment is inevitable. The first sacrifice we shall make is parts of the individual cultures within the faith – Nigerians, Egyptians, Pakistanis all carrying bits of their culture around their necks like a dead weight, slowing down progress. That will be shed, allowing a return to the basics of our religion ... The position of women will become different, more liberalized. We shall lose our suspicion of science and technology, fears which hold back so many Muslim nations. We shall acquire the idea of democracy, the clever balance of responsibility and freedom (Wolffe 1993:164; see also Vertovec and Peach 1997:39-41).

These words hint at the necessity to adjust, but even more strongly at the need to drop regional cultural traditions with which Islam has become saturated and

¹⁵ The ethnic composition of various local communities may vary considerably, with many North Island communities showing a predominance of South Asians (including Fiji Indians).

which prevent a unified worship and strong common identity. To the extent that this identity is one which emphasises exclusiveness, Islamic orthopraxis may become a convenient instrument of self-other distinction (cf. Timmerman 2000:89). However, the self-other distinction must be kept within bounds and be balanced by a perceived need to stress inclusiveness and some degree of adaptation to the host society. Or at least an image must be created which to the outside presents an Islam of a kind which fits into the fabric of the host country. Success in this campaign hinges on the discouragement, if not suppression, of “unreasonable” traditions and above all the denial of a fanatical brand of Islam or its “fundamentalisation”.

Internationalisation of Islam and detachment from regional and local traditions – a process of purification as no doubt some Muslims perceive it – may, however, also lead to fundamentalist features, to Islamism (as, for instance, Timmerman 2000 observed among Turkish women in Belgium). The line between fundamentalism and a form of Islam which Gellner (1994) calls High Islam is a very fine one. Gellner asserts a basic difference between High Islam, an elitist and “pure”, i.e. law-orientated, form and folk-Islam enriched with accretions, such as saint worship and the like. These two forms are engaged in a struggle for dominance which is fought and won on a cyclical basis. High Islam is geared to an anonymous, mobile society produced by modern conditions and therefore is better suited to a diasporic situation (Gellner 1994:24). In the struggle for Islamic “authenticity”, an Islam stripped of regional cultural variations and ethnic peculiarities is of course more apt to act as a uniting force. It is this form of Islam which gains prominence in the construction of an immigrant Muslim identity.

The process of doctrinal and ortho-practical unification through eliminating regional variants is not an easy one for the persons involved. As it was pointed out to me, Muslims – as is the case with most other believers, I am sure – would not appreciate being told that their cherished traditions and their form of worship are wrong and not in accord with doctrinal purity. Such intolerant assertions would only lead to *fitnah* (schism) and the withdrawal of individuals from common worship. Unification is a long drawn out and complex process in which voluntary agreement and consensus without any hint of coercion are the vital elements. Moreover, such consensus may only be temporary and may easily be revoked, be it through the changing composition of the community or a change of hearts and minds. For instance, the laboriously achieved agreement to bring together two prayer times to allow worshippers more time for sleep over the summer months (see Kolig 2001), was revoked the year after as it was no longer perceived to serve a beneficial purpose. Obviously, unification of worship, internationalisation of doctrine, and adjustment to conditions obtaining in the host society, are processes which neither work in tandem, nor do they lead to an irreversible, clearly delineated condition in the short term.

Yalcin-Heckmann’s (1994) study among young Turks in Germany stresses emergent syncretisms, whereas Afshar’s (1998) and Timmerman’s (2000) place the accent on the emergence of a purified (of folk traditions),

praxis-oriented, and law-oriented Islamism in Yorkshire (Britain) and Belgium. Some Muslims, however, abandoned Islam “as their primary badge of identity” (Afshar 1998:124). To the extent that it can be certain that these different responses are not the result of the observers having construed the empirical evidence differently, they are indicative of different strategies of dealing with globalisation and an immigrant condition. Whether the New Zealand situation leans more one way or the other in the long term, it is too early to say.

The Dunedin community shows no sign of radicalisation, but rather sensible adaptation, meaningful *ijtihad*: for ease of life, as it was explained to me (see Kolig 2001).¹⁶ In constructing a concessionary form of Islam, guiding maxims tend to be taken from the scriptures which seem to be designed to have an ameliorating and placating influence and which can be interpreted to exhort people to reasonable piety but to avoid laxity as well as undue fervour or extremism. These scriptural passages are taken to rationalise reasonable adjustments and co-existence without compromising important and fundamental tenets

The role of the community’s spiritual leadership is of crucial importance in helping to inculcate certain views and conceptions and in shaping in a very general sense the attitudes of the community as a whole. “... Churches have ... reality-forming power *in esse* in so far as they mould and control the lives of their members ... The religious communities also have great reality-forming power *in posse* because they tend, and have at times tended with great vigour and some success, to become shapers of the inclusive society, of the whole social universe” (Stark 1958:80). While this influence, as far as Islam goes, may not be all-pervasive and extend to all Muslims resident in Dunedin, or New Zealand for that matter, it does form a factor that must be taken into account. If we translate “churches” to mean religious communities under spiritual guidance and leadership, this need not be *uluma* or even a particular *alim*, although one leader’s influence can reverberate considerably. This happens, for instance, when the pernicious influence of certain Islamic teachers is reported in the media, who seem to have the ability to engender certain *jihadic* and *mujahedin* inclinations that do not shrink from homicidal or suicidal missions. The influence of respected elders can go a long way in forming particular propensities. And, while the Dunedin community does not have the benefit of the presence of trained experts or clerics (*uluma*, *mujtahid*, *fukuha*, let alone *mufti*), the earnest striving of some devoted and respected elders has a similar effect.

New Zealand’s (and Dunedin’s) Muslim leadership is at pains to project Islam as a moderate, tolerant, and rational faith, disinclined towards flamboyant, spectacular, and extraordinary forms of belief. (The previously mentioned pizza case is an example of the leadership’s desire, by its intervention, to

¹⁶ *Ijtihad* is defined by Fazlur Rahman (1982:8) as “the effort to understand the meaning of a relevant text of precedent in the past, containing a rule, and to alter that rule by extending or restricting or otherwise modifying it in such a manner that a new situation can be subsumed under it by a new solution”.

project a picture of Islam as a moderate religion which is wholly adverse to expressions of flamboyant piety). It is also its agenda to discourage radical, extremist action of any kind. To create a decisive image of moderation, consistent with Western conceptions of institutionalised, mainstream religion, has, for obvious reasons and for some time, been a major concern. If anything, the events of 11 September have intensified this desire to distance New Zealand's Muslims from any militant, extremist, and fanatical aspects.

In August 2001, media reported on a case of *ratif*, a faith healing practice, in a Muslim congregation in Auckland. A man was wounded with a sword by his brother in a ritualistic manner, inflicting cuts across his chest and abdomen which were expected to miraculously and instantaneously heal through prayer. Allegedly, it had worked once before, but this time the expected miracle failed to materialise and police intervened. Muslim spiritual leaders condemned this action in press releases and interviews as misguided. One may surmise that their main concern was that through this action harm would be done to the image of Islam in general as well as to the country's Muslims' reputation, in a host society which, despite religious tolerance, looks with disdain and disgust on such displays of religious fervour. While faith-healing (through laying on of hands) may be slightly more acceptable and is, in fact, practised in some Christian congregations, self-mutilation and any act of inflicting injury with the expectation of a miraculous cure is usually looked at askance, though not necessarily always being considered as violating the legal code. In discussing this event with Dunedin's spiritual leadership, the deplorability of this act was doctrinally rationalised. The avoidance of abuse of one's own body (for instance, through drink or drugs) is mandatory to Muslims, it was explained to me, but also was wilfully inflicting physical harm to it. Scriptural references such as "your body has rights over you" (*Hadith*) and "make not your own hand contribute to your destruction" (*Qur'an* 2/195) were pointed out to me as interdictions on such acts even if they are performed in conjunction with a display of faith.

This event – beyond demonstrating the concern leadership has with projecting an appropriate and acceptable image of Islam – shows clearly the attempt to establish a scripturalist, rule-oriented, puritanical, literal, sober, egalitarian, and anti-ecstatic form of Islam, features which Gellner (1994:18) identifies as High Islam and which is more suited to internationalisation. Sober and rule-oriented (i.e. scripturally-based) Islam is more apt to be adopted in diasporic and internationalised circumstances than culturally and ethnically specific forms. To form an *umma* (community) without sectarian and ethnic boundaries it is necessary to take recourse to pure forms: i.e., those purged of specific, "sectarian", and in particular "unhelpful", in terms of public perception "damaging", forms.

It seems that in recent years, before its fall at the end of 2001, the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, in particular, gave great concern to the Muslim leadership in New Zealand, for its perceived potential to do harm to the image of Islam which Muslims wished to present to the host society. Already before the terrorist attack on the USA, the Muslim leadership at times went to great

length to distance themselves and Islam *per se* from what was declared the excesses of the Taleban regime in Afghanistan. Occasions such as the iconoclastic destruction of the Bamiyan Buddha statues, reports of the prohibition of women from education and participation in public affairs, compulsory display of badges for religious minorities, and the like led to frequent declarations by Muslim leaders that these actions were intolerable aberrations from the true spirit of Islam.¹⁷

In my conversations with Dunedin Muslims, inevitably there was a search for the scriptural basis, both in favour of such extreme measures and against them, while any possible interpretation in favour was quickly dismissed as based on misunderstanding, faulty exegesis, or as in contradiction with another, more important scriptural rule. In relation to the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas, this basis, it was speculated, may lie in a *Hadith* which was paraphrased as “angels are not entering a home where there are pictures”. However, as was explained to me, this scriptural passage would not in any way condone and support the wanton vandalism of the Buddhas’ total destruction. This interdiction would refer only to statues of high realism, but not to less realistic depictions, photographs, and the like. However, the event served as an opportunity to point out the seriously biased nature of Western media reporting. While much ado was made about the destruction of lifeless figures, little was reported about the destruction of people and their livelihood in Palestine; and even if this occurs sometimes, it leads to much less moral indignation. Comments like this point to a major source of alienation for Muslims from majority Western society: they give an impressive demonstration of the existence of quite different, though from a Western point also eminently plausible, priorities, and above all they are castigating an apparent lack of understanding of and empathy for Muslims. (It is moot to speculate whether the same perspective would be applied if Islamic monuments had been destroyed or desecrated).

Especially following the events of 11 September, the Islamic concept of *jihad* (struggle), sometimes called the 6th pillar of Islam, assumed considerable prominence in media reporting, thereby strongly colouring public perception and understanding of Islam in the West. For Muslims, the danger lies in the creation of a distorted image of the concept as referring to an obligation incumbent on all Muslims everywhere to take up arms against infidels. This, logically, would portray New Zealand’s Muslims as a potential, but quite physical, danger to the host society, ready to strike at any moment. Indeed,

¹⁷ In the media this prescription of badges was condemned as reminiscent of the Nazi practice of “labelling” Jews, Gypsies, and other “undesirables”. In the Taleban’s case it was obviously intended to imitate practices enforced on the *dhimmi* (tolerated adherents of other major religions such as Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrism) in previous centuries in some parts of the Islamic world. It did not have the sinister implications as under the Nazi regime and was defended by the Taleban as a mechanism protective of religious minorities rather than discriminative. One can imagine that when ostentatious piety (total veiling for women, compulsory mosque attendance, keeping the *ramadan*) is vigorously enforced (by a religious police administering on the spot beatings, or worse, for non-compliance) it could be an advantage to be identifiable on the street as a non-Muslim.

this or a similar notion of the meaning of *jihad* seems to have inspired the philosophy of Al-Qaeda, but led also to similar utterances by the political party PAS (Parti Islam se-Malaysia) in Malaysia and some extremist groups in Indonesia, for example, who also appear to have a rather belligerent understanding of *jihad* and of the necessity to carry it out vis-à-vis the West. So much prominence was given in Western media to this kind of interpretation of *jihad* (Saddam Hussein is reported to draw on this concept in his diatribes against the West), that Muslims rightly see it as a rich source of Western paranoia which in turn justifies even greater prejudices against Muslims and Islam. This concern among the Dunedin Muslim leadership led them to arrange a public video screening of a lecture by the well-known Egyptian-Canadian Islamic authority (*alim*) Jamal Badawi on the meaning of *jihad*. Needless to say, the message was that the intrinsic, true meaning of *jihad* is a peaceful inner struggle, a moral fight with oneself for personal betterment.

The period immediately after the attack on American targets was a time of high tension for Muslims. Although no physical attacks on Muslims or their property occurred in Dunedin, verbal abuse (threatening phone-calls, remarks in the street, hate mail, and graffiti on the mosque) did occur, increasing their discomfort. The intentions of the police, wishing to be informed on such events, were interpreted ambiguously. Police attention in fact was viewed with some discomfort, as the motif was suspected to be surveillance of Muslims rather than being for their protection. Not surprisingly, the Muslim leadership felt anxious about the image of Islam. An impassioned plea by Mr Mohammed Hassanin (immediate past president of OMA), in an open letter, was published by *The Otago Daily Times* (20/9/2001 p.13) – a plea not to condemn Muslimhood as a whole and not to judge Islam by the acts of a few fanatics. The letter also took the opportunity to castigate the stereotypically negative images of Islam used and perpetrated by the media and (some) politicians, thus expressing a widespread feeling among Muslims: “please let the greed of politics and unfair media coverage be away from the lives of innocent people”. While *The Otago Daily Times* cannot be faulted for their fair-mindedness in giving the letter prominent space, characteristically on the same page, just below the letter, there were two articles on terrorism, once again visually establishing the sort of connection Islam now has in the Western mind.

While an important task was seen by Dunedin Muslim leadership, following the terrorist attacks, to defend Islam and improve, or correct, its image, it was also concerned with fostering moderate views among the Muslim community itself. As reports increase of mosque congregations in Britain and elsewhere serving as recruitment centres for extremist organisations, the Dunedin leadership tries to exercise a moderating influence. Characteristic perhaps is the following event: a prominent member of the leadership team was approached by a young Muslim about whether he should rejoice in the attack on the USA. The Islamic concept of *ukkuwa* (solidarity), because of its predominantly religious connotations, would predispose Muslimhood to adopt an anti-Western attitude in such matters, and consequently may generate some sympathy for acts labelled “terrorist” in the

West.¹⁸ Whether for this or for anti-American sentiments, there seem to be grounds for Muslims to experience a moral dilemma. The young man, however, was firmly instructed – so I was told – that the loss of innocent human life is always to be deplored. Clearly, the radicalisation of Muslimhood is not seen as productive. Strengthening the image of Islam as a peace-loving religion, not just towards the outside world, but also as an inner process, appears to be important to at least some of the leadership.

The Dunedin Muslim community holds an annual Islamic awareness week with film screenings, lectures, and discussion forums. The purpose is not to proselytise among “infidels”, but a public relations exercise: to increase rapport with the host society, to inform about Islam, and to allay fears about its true nature. The Muslim news bulletin *al Mujaddid* (*The Reformer*, October 1999 vol.1/nr.6 p.4) in referring to the rationale for such occasions, wonders: “how do we correct this misconception” that Islam is “a religion of the terrorist with its barbaric practices”? It goes on to say:

A group of Muslims, furthest away from Mecca and practising Islam in the most southern part of the hemisphere, have gone back to the *Qur'an* and the Sunnah and have found a direction in doing their share of enlightening the people around them about Islam. The Otago Muslim Association (OMA), together with the Muslim Students Association (MUSA) of Dunedin, have given meaning to the following Ayat or sign from ALLAH (Subhanahu Wa Ta'ala), ‘Invite people to the way of your LORD with wisdom and goodly exhortation and argue with them in the most kindly manner’ (*Qur'an* 16:125)¹⁹

These events, though well attended by Muslims and politely reported on by the local media, are chronically dogged by low attendance of non-Muslims. Attention is predominantly paid by committed Christians who use the occasion to vent their spleen.

An accord of cautious distance

Undoubtedly New Zealand as a nation, on an official level, is informed by a sincere multi-cultural tolerance and an earnest desire to be respectful of alien cultural and religious traditions. One might say that there is a reservoir of genuine goodwill on the part of the host society towards Muslims, as expressed through the media treatment of matters concerning Muslims resident in New Zealand. Seeing an absence of xenophobic traits in New Zealand society means, of course, ignoring individual roguish behaviour displayed towards individuals identifiable as Muslims: this seems to be the fate

¹⁸ Shepard (1980:158) also briefly mentions the inclination of New Zealand Muslims “to feel for the Muslim side” in world affairs.

¹⁹ In this context “ayat” refers to “verse” in the *Qur'an*.

of all noticeable minorities in all societies, at least periodically or episodically, when more or less latent xenophobia, racism, and other forms of intolerance emerge and express themselves in phenomena ranging from withdrawal from, to open violence towards the cultural other.

A society, such as that of New Zealand, which has rejected its own traditional religiosity (by privatising religion and separating the state clearly from it – both major features of secularisation) perhaps finds it easier to accord tolerance to an alien, imported faith. However, this tolerant attitude of mainstream society extended to Muslims accepted into this country and conceding them the space to worship as they will, is strongly tempered with “Orientalist” views on Arabism, Islam, and the Islamic world which is not only geographically distant, but is perceived as at best unbridgeably alien and at worst very dangerous. The upshot is a certain reserve which shows none of the violent features that mar ethnic and religious relations so often in European countries, but nonetheless is subliminally noticeable. The result is also the absence of ghettoisation of the Muslim minority so strikingly noticeable for instance in France (de Wenden 1996) but also in other places (cf. Naguib 2002:163). Yet, it imposes a cautious distance which is reciprocated on the Muslim side. Genuine multi-ethnicity remains not just not official policy, but also, as yet, an unattainable ideal. In the New Zealand discourse, Anglo-Celtic (pakeha) “standard” culture remains the benchmark and defines a New Zealand identity which admits, and only to some extent, concessions to what is officially classed as “traditional Māori culture” and Māoriness.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the Muslim identity tends to be strongly inward-oriented and receives its major cues from overseas. It instils a diasporic inclination in which an Islamic identity is paramount and the preservation of purity of faith forms the benchmark, which is only achievable through a deliberate delineation against the cultural other and which stresses extra-local links at the expense of local integration. By adopting a Muslim identity as personally defining, and through the attempt of keeping faith with Islamic prescriptions, the willingness to achieve a closer bond with the host society tends to be often sacrificed. Diasporic thus becomes not only a descriptive label from the outside, but a reflection of Muslim intentionality itself.²⁰

Clearly, a cautious distance also seems desirable for practical reasons. Many Muslims are wary of real or imagined difficulties in every-day social intercourse. Deprecatory remarks, even staring (at the Islamic dress of women), may be experienced as discouraging closer contact. Interesting here is the compensatory rationale one woman found:

I do not care about some behaviours or gazes from some people. The most important thing [is] that I am pleasing my lord by dressing in this way and it is impossible to leave my *hijab* [Islamic head covering for women] for any reason or in any place. I am so

²⁰ Shepard (2002:248) also remarks that the majority of Muslims are not “firmly rooted” in New Zealand, prefer to maintain overseas connections, and show a tendency towards a high degree of geographic mobility.

proud of my dressing and I feel that we are more civilised and superior to those who are semi-naked.

Others have reasoned that it is better not to socialise with non-Muslims partly because of the risk of unknowingly consuming *haram* (unclean, forbidden) food, or for fear of rejection and ridicule through declining to participate fully in the jollities, but, even more importantly, for fear of insulting to the host by refusing food or drink. Some, however, do realise that total withdrawal may be taken as a sign of hostility or perhaps even of harbouring fanatical tendencies.

Disengagement from the host society is based on the intuitive realisation that many values are not shared, that behaviour norms of either side are often, albeit unintentionally, provocative to the other. There is of course also the looming fear of infection of life style, a gradual and unintentional assimilation which would infringe on Islamic principles. (A great, and probably not unrealistic, fear of Muslim parents seems to be the television programming and its potential to seduce children into adopting immoral and undesirable ideas and behaviour forms).

To what extent Muslims experience as uncomfortable the nearness of “infidels” (*mushrikun*) beyond these practical reasons is also influenced, if not defined, by theological considerations. Islamic scriptures contain exhortations of superiority of Islam and harsh commands regarding relationships with “infidels”. For instance, and perhaps most impressively, Qur’anic verses, such as 3/110, which says “You are the best community evolved for mankind, enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong” (quoted in Esposito 1991:30) and “O believers, fight the unbelievers who are near to you, and let them find in you a harshness; and know that God is with the godfearing” (*Qur’an* 9/123 quoted in Wolffe 1993:156) clearly carry a message of a kind of superiority that denies the need for adjustment and instead impresses the need to supervise and judge. And there are of course also harsher imperatives such as “kill the *mushrikun* [unbelievers, idolaters] wherever you find them, and capture and besiege them, and lie in wait for them in each and every ambush” (*Qur’an* 5/9); and: “fight against the *mushrikun* ... collectively as they fight against you collectively” (*Qur’an* 9/36), which, when isolated from their context, may seem to convey a message of implacable hostility.

Not surprisingly, when I raised these issues, it was pointed out that only a minority would understand the verses in this literalist and decontextualised way. Only by taking them out of context could they become the rationale for extremism; as is done, for instance, by the so-called *Takfiri* in the Muslim world who, by their strict and restrictive interpretation of the scriptures, do not even perceive of other Muslims as true believers and may feel justified in resorting to harsh recriminatory action towards them. To what extent such exhortations do exert some faint subliminal influence that does not entail extremism, but may lead to sentiments of detachment vis-à-vis non-Muslims, is, however, difficult to determine.

While the Dunedin (and in my experience New Zealand) leadership downplays these scriptural elements, such ideas can create discomfort in social

intercourse with the non-Muslim culture which happens to be dominant. It may in fact nourish aggression. On a subliminal level, it may generate resistance to assimilation; and it may reinforce a diasporic attitude expressed in a communal “insularity”, social inward-orientation, and a perpetuated distance from the host society.

“Islamic thought has usually made a clear distinction between *dar al-Islam* (the abode of peace), territories of Muslim rule, and *dar al-harb* (the abode of war) countries ruled by non-Muslims. Muslims living in *dar al-harb* potentially had two strategies in order to live in accordance with the teachings of Islam: *jihad*, struggle or *hijra*, emigration” (Wolffe 1993:156). French Muslims have created a concept of a realm, *Dar al Ahd*, the world of treaty, truce or agreement (*ahd*), which mediates and ameliorates the dichotomous contrast between *Dar al Islam* and *Dar al Harb*, the world of Islam and the world of War, the abode of the infidels (Kepel 1997:151; see also Esposito 2002:35 where he mentions a similar concept of *Dar-al-Sulh*). This allows devout Muslims to live in inner peace in non-Islamic host societies towards which otherwise, subliminally at least, they would have to feel antagonistic and might experience a sense of unease (cf Kolig 2001:143). As one Muslim explained to me, this concept allows Muslims to have respect for the laws of the host society – to the extent that these do not contradict Islamic laws of course. It would appear that New Zealand Muslims have left this issue in a kind of grey zone, opting instead for reasonable adjustment through *ijtihad*.

Because of this cautious distance, Muslim leaders rarely speak out on matters concerning the wider society. It seems reasonable to surmise that the reluctance to be drawn into an all too intensive participation in the day-to-day political discourse has to do with image construction: to be seen to be too active, or perhaps ambitious, in politics may be damaging to the reputation of both Islam and Muslims. Thus, it does not happen very often that the Muslim leadership comments on the country’s affairs, beyond occasionally remarking on biased media reporting with regard to issues affecting the Islamic world in general. Recently, some rare exceptions happened in relation to New Zealand’s involvement in Afghanistan and the prospect of further involvement in a conflict with Iraq. While in a secularised society it is not expected for churches to engage in an ongoing dialogue with state authorities or political circles, nor is such a dialogue encouraged by the political system, Christian and Jewish organisations do occasionally speak out on matters of state or public interest. Muslims usually confine themselves to matters of faith, although Islam would predispose them towards ignoring the church-state separation of secularised, Western societies.²¹

Muslims seem to have a minimal degree of integration in the social and political discourse, despite the fact that a few Muslims are active on the local and national political level. These individuals, however, do not purport to speak for Muslimhood or Islam, and attempting to do so would probably be rejected by a majority of Muslims. The cautious distance maintained by

²¹ Gellner has argued that Islam, in contrast to Christianity, has shown an astonishing imperviousness towards secularisation (see, for example, Gellner 1994:15).

Muslims seems to be motivated to some extent by notions of solidarity (*ukhuwwa*) with the world-wide *umma*. As it was pointed out to me, as an illustrative example, this would make it difficult for Muslims to feel that they are behind the New Zealand government in its support of the killing of Muslims in Afghanistan by US forces. This is probably just one example from among a number of issues preventing Muslims from a close engagement with New Zealand polity and politics. The whole concept of *umma* (community of believers) does tend to reinforce such a sense of greater attachment with sections of the outside world, rather than aiding the development of nationalistic interests, and thus probably contributes substantially to a diasporic attitude. The distance experienced and maintained by Muslims is reciprocated by New Zealand society at large, which is ill-informed about Islam, and, though generally of good will and in a secularist sense religiously tolerant, suffers from an Orientalist inability to empathise with a Muslim point of view.

New Zealand Muslims are aware of the need to adapt their religious relations to the dictate of the host society, which is secularised and suspicious of an overly strong commitment to Islam despite a substratum of tolerance and religious liberalism not usually encountered in Europe. Reorganising their life would mean not only that religion becomes a private matter in line with secularised practice, but also requires the construction of an Islamic way of life that blends in. While a process of valorisation of religion and religious relations may occur in the diaspora, leading perhaps even to the strengthening of an (adjusted) adherence to an Islamic identity, it also requires providing an ideological defence for this identity. Even though the degree of antagonism towards Muslims is relatively small in New Zealand – by comparison with other Western countries – the Muslim leadership recognises the need to overcome and counteract it by constructing and presenting a well-adjusted and favourable form and image of Islam.

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