CHAPTER TWO

COMMUNITY, IDENTITY, DIVERSITY

The Beginnings

On the international scale of the worldwide Muslim diaspora, the Muslim community in New Zealand—of about 40,000 to 45,000 people—is very small, comparable only to the smallest national communities in some Western European countries.¹ Not only because of New Zealand’s geographic remoteness, but also because of the restrictive immigration policies that have been implemented for decades, it had grown very little until about 15 years ago. The ‘White New Zealand’ policy was abandoned in 1974, opening up the country to multi-ethnic and multi-religious immigration, based largely on criteria other than nationality, ethnicity, and race. A quota system favouring immigrants from European countries was applied at first, but now immigration is mainly determined by a skill-based scheme.²

Becoming recently more numerous as well as a little more vociferous, the Muslim community has gained greater attention compared to minorities of other religionists. However, the deeper reason for this increased attention is not its sudden growth or its attention-seeking, but mostly a result of events overseas. Domestically, the Muslim minority has kept a low profile, but due to unfortunate events far from these shores the limelight has been shone on New Zealand’s Muslim minority against their will. Undeservedly coming at times under some suspicion, the community has done nothing to warrant such attention. Leaving public sentiments aside, for serious scholars, New Zealand’s Muslims are of great interest for another reason: they are prime examples of the workings of a nation’s cultural recognition policies and the integration of distinct religious and cultural minorities. In the world today New Zealand can be regarded as one of the culturally most lib-

¹ Compare this with the estimated numbers of Muslims in France (up to 6 million), Germany (about 4 million), the UK and Italy (each up to about 2 million).
² There are exceptions as immigration from several Pacific island nations is subject to a quota system that ignores skill.
eral countries, assuring cultural tolerance and reasonable equality, both in law and public discourse, to its minorities. This is certainly an achievement of more recent years and has not always been true. Even today, there are voices of dissent arguing that cultural liberalism has gone too far, leading to a weakening, if not total abrogation, of New Zealand’s essential, traditional identity. But these voices, determined to turn a blind eye to the reality of globalisation, are being largely ignored.

The Muslim presence in New Zealand goes back about 130 years, although the exact beginnings are shrouded in the mists of a past in which Muslims were hardly recognised by majority society. It seems public attention was initially drawn to these religionists only because they were Chinese, then a mistrusted and vilified immigrant minority. The census records of 1874 contain the earliest mention of Muslims in New Zealand. These records list 17 ‘Mohamatans’ (in some rendition ‘Mahometans’), all males, of whom at least 15 were Chinese working in the Otago goldfields, at Dunstan near Dunedin. Their religious proclivities and needs were not recorded or remarked upon. We do not know whether they were devout, in which way they worshipped, or how they expressed their piety or otherwise. It is not known whether they eventually decided to stay permanently or whether they returned to China. It is also unknown whether they, or some of them, founded families in New Zealand and passed on their faith to their offspring. The latter seems rather unlikely, since there is no information of Muslims among the present-day New Zealand-Chinese community. The Chinese phase of the Muslim presence passed without leaving a trace.

The records also mention the first Muslim to be buried in New Zealand, a Javanese sailor by the name of Mohamed Dan, who died in Dunedin in 1888. It is to be expected that there were a few Muslim sailors (probably of Southeast Asian or South Asian provenance) who,

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4 This information is from the Federation of Islamic Associations of New Zealand Silver Jubilee booklet ‘Muslims in New Zealand’ (2005); 34.