Reformed Journal
Book Review section
January 1982

DO MUSLIMS NEED THE GOSPEL?

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(C. George Fry and James R. King, *Islam: A survey of the Muslim Faith,*
Grand Rapids; Baker, 1980, 157 pp., $5.95)

Islam is an attractive, easy-to-read book, written during the Iranian hostage crisis by proponents of "dialogue-witness continuum." The reader is within three pages of the end of the book before discovering this overriding motivation. Only then, in retrospect, is the tone of the book understandable: its lavish praise for a religious system called by the authors "magnificent: and "meaningful."

The authors intend their book as a text--but if it were to be used as such some kind of balance would urgently be needed. At one point the author's good will carries them on a flight of fancy in which they play with the word "Muslim": to arrive at amazing conclusions like these: "*Muslim* can be applied to all men who live in the natural world and obey its laws. . ." *Muslim* can refer to all monotheists, to all who believe in one God . . ." "*Muslim* refers to anyone who knows God on the basis of His special revelation through prophecy." Sweeping us all together, Fry and King claim that Islam has always linked Jews, Christians, and Muslims as "People of the B ook" (a misconception repeated elsewhere in the book). Actually, both in the Quran and in Islamic tradition, the term "People of the Book" is reserved for Christians and Jews only.

To prepare the way for their concept of dialogue with Muslims, Fry and King write that "it is the most impressive religious and cultural entity ever devise d by humanity." "If, indeed, he (Muhammad) was not able to read, there is a striking parallel between the unlettered prophet giving birth to the Arabic Word and the Virgin Mary giving birth to Christ: the Word of God." Also: "Christians see Jesus Christ as a moral teacher and as an active human being who introduced a new religion." The authors cite a certain list of the one hundred greatest leaders of history as saying "that Muhammad is the single most influential figure ever to live." In the face of such a chorus of praise for Islam, the Christian reader may be excused if he or she begins to feel uneasy--can 800 million people all be wrong?

Fry and King make other statements which must be questioned. To preach the gospel without being in a position to give a cup of cold water, they say, would be a denial of the incarnation! Elsewhere they remark that "healing the sick in Christ's name is preaching," with the inference that there need be no actual verbalization of the gospel--as if every Muslim were a dire physical or material

distress, when actually there are millions living in anxiety and despair, whose need is deeply spiritual. For them the preaching of the biblical gospel meets their most urgent need.

In the final chapter Fry and King are very critical of the various methods past and present used to bring the gospel to Muslims. They appear to champion the inviolability of any person's culture. To upset it would be a crime. To convert a Muslim would be to tear at his roots in his '*ummah'* of community. Quite evidently the captivity of one's culture is to be preferred to the freedom of eternal life in Christ. Considering that conversion is the work of the Holy Spirit, one wonders if Fry and King propose that we dictate where and how the Holy Spirit may work.

The only viable method, according to the authors is the "dialogue-witness continuuml" A contemporary British writer on Islam James Laffin has observed in his latest book *The Dagger of Islam,* the praiseworthy aspirations certain Christians have for dialoguing with Muslims. But as he remarks: "To understand Christians is, logically enough by Islamic terms, not Muslim ambition."

It is unfortunate that at a time when there is a great need for clear and distinct biblical reflection on Islam, this book falls so far short of its goal.