

CHRISTIANS WITHIN MUSLIM COMMUNITY:

A REVIEW ARTICLE

by Colin Chapman

[The following was published as a book review of Beyond the Mosque, Christians Within Muslim Community, by Phil Parshall (Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, MI 49506, USA, 1985. 256pp. \$9.95) in the British Christian magazine, Evangel, and is reprinted with the author's permission. Our interest in the article lies in what the author has to say about the question of how Christians who have come out of Islam should relate, as a community, to their society of origin, in the light of the ideological nature of Islamic society and the barriers this raises.]

This book must surely be required reading for anyone interested in Muslim evangelism today. The author has worked for more than 20 years in Muslim countries, and having already had many opportunities to engage in the academic study of Islam, wrote this book during a semester as a Fellow at Harvard University.

The basic question he tackles is one which has been widely discussed in recent years: "Is there ever a converging set of circumstances that will allow converts to remain members in good standing within Islamic community?" His answer is that Muslim converts can hardly continue, for example, to join in the prayers at the Mosque, because the ritual is so closely associated with Islamic beliefs, theology and religious practice; they therefore need to move "beyond the Mosque", physically as well as spiritually." If only we can learn to "lessen the peripheral offense and distance between Muslims and Christians," it may then be possible for converts to "continue within the mainstream of life in a Muslim society, yet distance themselves from things compromisingly Islamic." In this way they can avoid "persecution and expulsion from Islamic ummah." (i.e. the total community of Islam).

While it is difficult to disagree with the main thrust of the argument or with the conclusions, there is one curious but significant omission in the whole argument. The Law of Apostasy is referred to briefly and indirectly, but is never discussed in detail. This may well be deliberate, since Parshall's analysis and his own experience lead him to be optimistic: "There is a fairly broad range of tolerance and intolerance among Muslims. The Sufis of Northern India may well be graciously accepting of a convert who seeks to carefully continue within the ummah of his birth. In other more radical areas of the Muslim world, it may be extremely difficult to maintain continuity with Islamic society once a commitment to Christ is made. Difficult, but I trust not impossible."

Generalizations can be dangerous, and much will depend on where one has worked in the Muslim world. Sadly, my own experience which has been largely in the Arab world, doesn't justify quite the same degree of optimism. So is there any truth in the saying that the further away one moves from Mecca, the less pure the Islam that one sees?

It may be, however, that the problem goes deeper than this. Parshall's refusal to tackle the Law of Apostasy means that we are never forced to ask how the conversion of a Muslim to Christianity appears in the eyes of the Muslim community. What does traditional Islamic Law have to say on the subject? If traditional Islamic teaching is upheld and applied, is it ever possible for converts to think of themselves as members of the Islamic ummah and members of the Body of Christ - both sociologically and theologically - at one and the same time?

Although no one in his senses should be advocating a return to the old "extractionism," I personally cannot easily forget the experience of one particular Egyptian Muslim convert. After I had been trying for many months to persuade her to remain within her own community, she exploded: "You missionaries have absolutely no idea what you are asking us to do! You foreigners have no conception of the subtle pressures to which I am subjected within my own family...." What happens, therefore, if and when going "beyond the Mosque" means being rejected by the Mosque, and going "to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore...." (Hebrews 13:13)?

FEEDBACK ON SIRA: A CORRECTION

by the Editor

The solicited feedback that we received relative to David Owen's article on Project Sunrise (Sira) [Vol. II, No. 4--1987] was published, collated and summarized, in Vol. III, No 2--1988, along with several editorial conclusions. Subsequent feedback has revealed a piece of misinformation that calls for correction.

On page 29, I included a quotation from one respondent who reported from a reliable source that when Sira was sold at a book fair in the gulf, "Muslims attacked this translation so strongly that the bookstand was almost closed down." I have since learned that this is a distortion of the facts. According to Owen, "there was one Muslim Shayk who confronted us about the book, but in a polite manner. But afterward, a number ... who had listened to the conversation apologized for the comments of the Shayk We sold 120 copies of Sira. The bookstand was NOT 'almost closed down'." My apologies for the incorrect information.