

BOOK REVIEWS

Kenneth Cragg. Muhammad and the Christian, A Question of Response.
London: Darton, Longman and Todd (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis
Books L8.95. Reviewer: EAM

In this book, Dr. Cragg ventures a response to the question of the Christian view of Muhammad. The reticence of Christians on this subject is puzzling to Muslims, who think that because they "respect" Jesus (i.e. by acknowledging him to be a prophet), Christians would similarly respect Muhammad. This study offers one view of a resolution to the problem.

The book is divided into nine chapters which cover every aspect of the question. After an introduction to the main issues and considerations, there are two chapters on the historical and political dimensions of Muhammad's prophethood, followed by two on his place in Sufism (Muslim mysticism) and in traditional Muslim thought. The remaining chapters deal with the nature of the Qur'anic revelation and its content, Biblical criteria which bear on the question, and finally, the author's own view on the matter.

The author introduces his study of "The Prophet in His History" with the Qur'anic statement (68:4), "Truly you have the very stamp of greatness," underlining the fact that from the beginning Muhammad had a self-awareness of his task as prophet. Other verses in this same surah speak of his vocation, the scriptures, his preaching, the hostility of those who heard, and his vindication. It is clear that there is a unique partnership of message and messenger, of historical setting where it began and to which it all returns "to a scripture via a biography and a biography with a scripture." The Qur'anic revelation is strictly limited to the 23 years of Muhammad's vocation; it begins with his call to "Recite" and ends at his death. God addresses Muhammad alone. Any due reckoning with Muhammad must therefore reckon with the Qur'an.

- In his fascinating study of "The Political Equation," Cragg brings out the fact that, according to Muslim historians, Jihad is a necessary part of a prophet's mission; "Verbal propagation is not only incomplete: it compromises, if not corroborated by the power-form of group solidarity politically operative" (Ibn Khaldun). Hijrah is seen as essential and the first step to recovery of Mecca. What evolved was "a personal religious 'submission' to God" on the one hand, and "a visible political 'submission' to Islam" as a "rule" of law, and then an empire, on the other. Cragg concludes that there is an "irreducible disparity" between the approach of Muhammad and that of Christ. For the one, the way to victory was through power and force; for the other, it was through suffering and love, the way of the cross. I appreciated Dr. Cragg's sensitivity to the Muslim viewpoint and to his difficulty in seeing faith as possible without political institution and visible communal structure.

I found the chapter on the Qur'an the most interesting. Cragg argues that though Muslims think God could not possibly be vulnerable to man, the very idea that God summons man to worship Him and sends prophets seems to imply that God is not indifferent to man's response. The glorious theme of creation in the Qur'an, man being made God's Khalifah, likewise does not speak of indifference. Many will be uncomfortable with the idea of letting the great 'positives,' as he calls them, be shared, of interpreting the great themes of Qur'an in such a way that they take on more or less Christian meanings. This leads up to the chapters on "Deciding by the Gospel" and to Cragg's own conclusion with reference to Muhammad.

Probably most readers of SEEDBED will not be able to accept Cragg's "positive, critical" response to the question of the prophethood of Muhammad. We would do well, however, to carefully study what he has to say about it, and know where we differ and why. This book is the most comprehensive and authoritative treatment of the subject to date. It is not always easy to follow his intricate reasoning. For most people, it is not wise to use the Qur'an to present Christ. But I was impressed with his idea of pointing out that yes, God is vindicated against pagan idols, and all forms of idolatry and self-worship of all types in our everyday lives, and that human sin is more often a flouting of God's sovereignty than plural worship.

Elizabeth W. & Robert A. Fernea. The Arab World: Personal Encounters. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books /Doubleday 1987. Reviewer: E.A.M.

This is a rewarding and highly readable book, by two well-known sociologists, which is very helpful for understanding the cultures and peoples of the Middle East. The different chapters describe what the authors experienced and observed, and personal relationships they had developed, in certain cities or areas of the Middle East at different times in their careers. The time period is from 1956 to 1983.

After the chapters on a given city or place, there is a "Comment" section describing the political, economic, or social conditions of that area/country or its relationships with the West. The authors express their feelings and frustrations with great honesty, sharing both good times and bad. Some parts may make the reader uncomfortable, as the book is not pro-western. You should put this book on your 1989 reading list to make you more aware of the strengths and creative abilities of the Arab peoples to battle against the odds and develop their own culture.

Following the introduction, there are two chapters on their experiences in Beirut, Lebanon (1956. etc. 1981). The authors comment on the transformation of Beirut from an oasis in a changing difficult Arab world to a city in a suspended state of siege. The occasion was Elizabeth's return to make a film of women in the PLO camps.