

## How Can We Know? An Essay on the Christian Religion

By A. N. Wilson

New York, Atheneum, 1985. 118 pp. \$10.95.

A British novelist, critic, and controversial former editor of the *Spectator* is here an intense disciple of Christ. *How Can We Know?* is A. N. Wilson's searching *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, urbane, gracefully written, and a remarkable tribute to the vitality of Christianity in what many predicted to be a post-Christian generation. His mode is temporary in that it is existentialist and autobiographical. It is equally biblical, that is exegetical and theological. His movement is often from current event to New Testament passage and back to present bumbolence, all on the same page.

The opening chapters are "The Call" and "The Way," blending Tolstoy with the Sermon on the Mount so as to focus on the topsy-turvy words of Jesus, magnetic in attractive power, pulling modern persons from the vanities of secular life. "It is in the maddeningly *contrary* quality of the words of Jesus that we know him to have spoken the word of God." "There is more danger to religion in compromising the Sermon on the Mount than there is in doubting the miraculous detail of the Resurrection."

These words soon pull one to the *person*, and, in chapters on "Forgiveness" and the "Bread of Heaven," the person becomes a *Presence* in power. "The sayings of Jesus call us not merely to follow his words, but to come to him as to the physician of our souls." "We become pure, as he purifies us." Word passes into sacrament. Resurrection experience comes to focus with the communion supper. "This do for my recalling." Though fully aware of what biblical critics have been saying about difficulties in recovering the words and career of the historical Jesus, Wilson, here and elsewhere through the book, is nevertheless shrewd in his capacity to recontact a person behind the witness of the early church and the New Testament, a person there who becomes a Presence here.

The closing chapters are "The Upper Room" and "The Truth." The former sketches the historical, existential community of faith-the church. The latter, venturing into the philosophy of religion, is a summary inquiry whether and how far a sophisticated, modern Britisher can still hold this old faith to be true. "How can we know?" The answer lies in the quality of discipleship. Here is truth with a personal backing.

A small book of such large scope (Tolstoy, the historical Jesus, the Sermon on the Mount, the Eucharist, the church, Anglican-Roman Catholic relations, non-Christian religions, meaning and truth in obifious belief) will inevitably be breezy and anecdotal in spots, and this one is. I found the latter chapters less fresh and exciting than the earlier

ones. Also, many issues are missing on which much turns in the current credibility and viability of Christianity, for example, the challenges of science to religion, or the sociopolitical effectiveness of faith in a world facing massive poverty, exploitation, and nuclear war. But one cannot do everything in a single book. This one centers on personal faith, vital to all else. It is a worthy essay in the tradition of C. S. Lewis and Malcolm Muggeridge.

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