

Willard, Dallas. *Knowing Christ Today: Why We Can Trust Spiritual Knowledge*. New York: HarperOne, 2009.

Dallas Willard is well known for his works in Christian discipleship. He won *Christianity Today's* Book of the year in 1998 with *The Divine Conspiracy*, and again in 2007 with *The Great Omission*. Such works, along with a number of others on related themes, make him one of contemporary Christianity's more notable spiritual writers. Willard is also a professional philosopher, holding a Professorship in the University of Southern California's School of Philosophy. In this professional capacity he has taken an interest in the areas of epistemology (the theory of knowledge), philosophy of mind, and of logic.

Willard's gifts as a spiritual writer come together with his grasp of philosophy in *Knowing Christ Today* to provide a highly readable defence of the idea that religious belief is to be understood as a form of *knowledge*. It is a view which stands in stark contrast to that widespread modern notion which regards religious belief as an expression of personal opinion, to be measured by the emotional or other benefits it provides. Not so, argues Willard. Religious beliefs are claims about reality, and may be assessed on that basis.

His approach is consciously intellectual: "this is not a devotional work and ... will require considerable mental effort to understand." (10) It is not, however, a technical philosophical work and is easily accessible to those with no formal training in philosophy. This is, at one and the same time, both a weakness and a strength. Philosophers will find that at points Willard simplifies to the point of distortion, but this is the price of making difficult concepts accessible to a non-specialist audience. In relative terms, one might say that this book is to religious epistemology what Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* is to astrophysics.

Willard makes three basic moves in *Knowing Christ Today*. In the first three chapters, he goes about describing our current situation in respect of religious knowledge claims. Here he argues that the idea that Christian faith deals with something other than knowledge about absolute reality has not only been disastrous for Christianity, but is entirely contrary to the nature of Christian faith as it has traditionally been understood. His objection is aimed squarely at modern authors who define faith as "belief without evidence," and he quite rightly takes particular objection to those who appeal to science against Christian truth claims. Willard does not criticise science *per se*, but merely points out that such matters are outside its proper area of inquiry.

In arguing that religion is concerned with knowledge, Willard emphasises the importance of religion to social morality. Such an argument seems to me to require that one share a particularly American view on such matters. It is just one of several points at which one sees that the book is tailored for an American readership and although at points one may find this somewhat irksome, it does not diminish the overall value of Willard's argument to a broader (non-American) readership.

Willard very pleasingly offers a definition of knowledge: "*We have knowledge of something when we are representing it (thinking about it, speaking of it, treating it) as it actually is, on an appropriate basis of thought and experience*" (15). Such a definition would not pass muster amongst professional epistemologists. It does not, for instance, adequately describe the relationship between knowledge and belief, and in speaking of how a thing "actually is" the definition enshrines a correspondence theory of truth. Both should cause any epistemologist to raise an eyebrow. Yet Willard is to be commended for at least offering a definition of knowledge *before* setting about the task of demonstrating its possibility.

It is a vanishingly rare practice, and a correspondingly great strength of the book. Of particular commendation is Willard's mention of "*an appropriate basis of thought and experience.*" The idea that our knowledge of something should arise from an "appropriate basis" is a widely accepted principle in epistemology [cf. Simon Blackburn, *Truth: A Guide for the Perplexed*, The Gifford Lectures 2004 (London: Penguin Books, 2005), p.9], and it is pleasing to see Willard give it due weight. Too often critics of Christianity make outrageous demands regarding what is required for Christian knowledge and it is gratifying to see Willard here bring an informed perspective to the matter.

This groundwork laid, Willard's second move is to present an argument for the truth of Christianity. Chapter four deals with "existence" while chapters five to seven deal with "intervention" (98). The approach is a familiar one: first, use traditional philosophical arguments to demonstrate that "there exists a very great nonphysical being that is the source of the physical universe" (114), and then use this as a point of departure to argue that this being is "the loving Father God of whom Jesus spoke" (115).

Chapter four contains the first part of this two-part approach and it contains few surprises to those familiar with traditional arguments for God's existence. Perhaps the most interesting point is made in regard to biological evolution: that far from explaining the regularities of nature, evolutionary theory presumes them, indeed is *dependent* upon them. Thus Willard disarms, I think quite successfully, one popular line of anti-theistic argument: that which appeals to biological evolution in an attempt to explain order in the universe in non-theistic terms.

Chapters five to seven are very interesting, but require only brief description. Chapter five is a treatment of miracles, including the resurrection of Jesus. Willard engages with Hume's familiar argument against miracles, and draws upon C.S. Lewis in making the case that God is actively involved in his creation. Chapter six extends this to argue that, through the exercise of appropriate spiritual disciplines, God can be actively involved in the life of the Christian believer. As such God can be *known* by the one who approaches him on "an appropriate basis of thought and experience." Chapter seven deals with the question of other religions. Here Willard rejects a "strong pluralism" which, without understanding what the various religious traditions actually claim, declares all religions essentially identical and therefore (by inference) all identically wrong! Not so, argues Willard. Religious traditions make distinct claims, some of which align more closely to reality than others. We may *know* which by giving due regard to the "appropriate basis" of religious claims. But does such knowledge lead necessarily to dogmatic arrogance? Not for Christians, Willard argues, for not only may Christians acknowledge that there is some truth in other religions ("weak pluralism"), but, more importantly, in affirming the truth of Christianity Christians affirm Christ's command of love and with it the principle of "doing unto others." Knowing that Christianity is true leads one away from, not toward, arrogant religious dogmatism.

Chapter eight contains Willard's third "move"—a very important call for Christian leaders to defend Christianity as *true*. Not through pulpit-thumping rhetoric but by taking to heart the argument so far advanced: that there is an "appropriate basis" for Christian truth which can be responsibly defended. Christian leaders ought first to inform themselves, and then to inform others, on such matters, so that they might bring others to the *knowledge* of Christian truth. And just as Willard's argument so far has not neglected the spiritual aspects of knowing Christ (chapter six), nor has it required dogmatic rejection of what is true in other religions (chapter seven) so Christian leaders should model not only philosophical rigour, but spiritual depth and Christian charity. In such an appeal, one can see the connections with Willard's other work on Christian discipleship.

I will close with what I think is perhaps the book's most helpful insight: that anybody who would be a teacher of humanity must address five fundamental questions. These are: What is reality?; Who is well-off or blessed?; Who is a truly good person?; How does one become a truly good person?; and How do we know which answers to the first four questions are true? Taken together, such questions provide a powerful means for analysing worldviews: those religious (or non-religious) systems of thought which define and shape our existence. These are the questions which primarily interest Willard, and his analysis is not simply that the answers given to these questions in our contemporary context are

inadequate, but that they are antithetical to Christian faith and yet, disastrously, still widely accepted by Christians themselves. But by reflecting upon these questions we may lay bare the assumptions that we bring to the task of knowing, and so identify and escape the pervasive religious scepticism of our time. Although limited in scope, *Knowing Christ Today* is a most helpful first-step to knowledge of the truth, and so to freedom.

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