



## God Explained in a Taxi Ride

Tony Watkins

### A short ride in a metaphysical machine

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Paul Arden, former Executive Creative Director of Saatchi and Saatchi, has a reputation for being different, for not taking the obvious line on any issue. One of his earlier books is entitled *Whatever You Think, Think the Opposite*. He argues that logic and common sense are fine for a supermarket manager, but anyone who really wants to make their mark needs to think differently, illogically even. Designer Roger Kennedy describes him as, 'Brilliant, bad, charming, irascible and totally off-the-wall, Paul Arden is an original with extraordinary creative drive and energy, blessed with a creative genius allied to a common sense that just isn't, well, common.' Graham Fink, Arden's successor at Saatchi, says that, 'He stands for the unusual, the different, the oblique.'

His new book, *God Explained in a Taxi Ride*, is

certainly unusual. Spirituality may be on many people's agenda, but so many books on the subject in High Street bookshops are little more than positive thinking dressed up in warm, fuzzy spiritual clothes. This book is much more direct in that it is concerned with the existence of God and, to a lesser extent, his nature. As you would expect, Arden is highly readable and comes at his subject from some unusual angles. It is a short book (with a high price), intended, as you may have guessed, to be readable within the length of a taxi ride, though like the notorious piece of string this is a rather flexible measure. How much you can read also depends on the talkativeness of the cabbie. If you find yourself on a particularly short journey, Arden gives a short cut to the last few pages and his concluding thoughts. Each page is little more than a sound bite or two; even the longest is only about a hundred words. Many pages are just a few words or a couple of sentences, usually with an entertaining illustration by Mark Buckingham who collaborated with Arden on the project.

Arden starts by reflecting on the fact that most people find themselves, at some point in their lives, reflecting on what life is all about. 'Billions of words in millions of books have been written on this subject,' he writes, 'and yet no one is any closer to an answer' (p. 8). This book is his attempt at a 'less wordy version'. He quickly drives a wedge between faith and the view of life that says there is nothing beyond science and evolution, saying, 'This is too stark for most of us.... Most of us need something spiritual to believe in' (p. 10).

The problem with this angle on faith is that it falls into the old trap of suggesting that we believe because we need something to give us comfort, not because there is something true to believe in. This was Freud's explanation for religion, basing his ideas on the earlier thinking of Ludwig Feuerbach. For Freud it was a way of explaining away something he rejected, whereas for Arden it appears to be motivated by an uncertainty about whether there is something there or not. It's the same when he writes about life after death: 'We are all scared of dying, because we are afraid of the unknown. To ease our fear of the dark, we invent explanations for the afterlife such as heaven and hell and reincarnation ... Religion is a light bulb, created by man to help him see in the

dark' (pp. 90, 92). It is possible to see religious belief as mere wish-fulfilment, but it is equally possible to see Freud's atheism as wish-fulfilment, believing in a naturalistic universe because he didn't want to face up to the implications of the possible existence of God. Arden recognises this, perhaps, when he asks, 'isn't a firm belief in the non-existence of God a religion in itself?' (p. 86).

More fundamental than our longings, important though they are, is the question of whether God actually exists or not. If he does, it provides a far more reasonable and comprehensive explanation for our longing for him than the mere idea of us wanting to be comforted in the face of death. But Arden doesn't always seem at all convinced about whether it is possible to know the truth. He says, 'There are no answers. We will never find them. God in his infinite wisdom has made it that way, so that life becomes infinitely interesting' (p. 12). In fact, he doesn't always seem convinced that God is really anything other than an idea: 'we seek consolation in an idea and the name we give to that idea is God' (p. 16).

Given Arden's reputation for not thinking like every other sheep in the field, it is very disappointing to find him bleating out the most predictable perspectives on God to be found in contemporary western culture. He follows the well-trodden path that there is no real difference between the various great faiths, saying, 'Most religions are different ways of saying the same thing' (p. 59). But while Arden is right to suggest that many of our conflicts arise out of not understanding each other, rather than disagreeing with each other, peace is not achieved by sweeping religious differences under the carpet. All the major faiths have clear sets of beliefs which, while they may overlap in parts with the beliefs of one or more of the others, have particular distinctives which set them apart. They believe different things about God (one or many or none?), about the human problem (lack of enlightenment or sin?) and about salvation (through our own efforts or through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on our behalf?), and other fundamental issues. They cannot all be true – particularly since Christianity is based solidly on Jesus's unique life and death and his claim to be the only way by which we can get to know God (John 14:6). They simply cannot all be equally valid and still say anything of any value at all – focusing on the lowest common denominator is

not the way to discover truth. It disparages all the religions in favour of an arrogant pluralism that sets itself above all individual religions and assumes that it has the insight and authority to judge them all.

The other sheep path which Paul Arden blindly follows is the idea that Christian faith has a small historical core and a substantial amount of invention: 'Jesus actually existed. His life has been recorded, glorified and dramatized.... His story has been told and retold so many times that it is difficult to separate fact from fiction.... I'm not saying the events described in the Bible didn't happen. Maybe they just didn't happen the way the Scriptures tell us' (p. 27). The problem, he alleges, comes because of a Chinese whispers-like process which has distorted the truth. 'It's hard to tell where history stops and legend begins,' he writes. 'It was written long after the death of Jesus, from word of mouth and hearsay.... It is the Church's Bible, not God's' (p. 30).

These ideas became commonplace in certain theological movements in the late nineteenth century, and held sway until the latter decades of the twentieth. But now they are very largely discredited thanks to contemporary scholarship into the dating of the original manuscripts, the reliability of the texts (and of the recent translations – things have moved a long way in the 400 years since the King James Bible that Arden seems to see as the final version!), the historicity of the events themselves, and much else. Very few scholars would now argue for a late date for the gospels, and many are dating Matthew, Mark and Luke (always thought to be the earliest) to the early fifties AD. That's only twenty years after the events they describe. In a media world like ours, that seems a long time. But in a primarily oral culture, that is not very long at all for the stories which were told to remain absolutely accurate. Besides, as the apostle Paul points out in a letter dated to between AD 52 and 55, many witnesses to Jesus's resurrection were still alive then (1 Corinthians 15:6): there were enough people around when these gospels were written to have demolished any false historical claims. The facts were never disputed, though the theological significance of them was. It is clear that Arden does not have the faintest idea what he is talking about in this context beyond some old and discredited ideas that still circulate around

unthinking critics of Christianity.

Yet despite significant criticisms of Arden's unthinking following of the crowd in these (and two or three other aspects), there is a charming freshness to the way in which he faces up to life's biggest question. It is hard not to smile at his breezy dismissal of cults and his understanding that religious institutions muddy the waters by adding on rules and creating religion rather than helping people develop a spiritual relationship with God. And it's wonderful to read his frank, all-capitals conclusion that there must be something more, something beyond this physical universe – a creator, in fact – unless we are prepared to say that the whole shebang is just an extraordinary cosmic fluke. Which brings us back to where he starts: most people around the world and down through history have known, deep down, that there must be something transcendent. And the fact that God is there is the reason why we long to know him and be accepted by him. Now Arden needs to look seriously at the evidence for orthodox, historical Christian faith and write another book about how compelling it is.

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