



## A friendly dialogue between an atheist and a Christian - a review

Ranald Macaulay

### A FRIENDLY DIALOGUE BETWEEN AN ATHEIST AND A CHRISTIAN

By Luis Palau & Zhao Qizheng  
Zondervan. 142 pages  
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#### Meagre challenge

This is a curious book. At one level it has an immediate appeal. Christians need to be challenging those of other religions and worldviews in the context of 'friendly dialogue'. This was Paul's approach in Acts, and evangelicals by and large have neglected it. So, it looks at first glance, as if, among other things, Zondervan has provided us with a useful apologetic model.

Given the aggressive atheism of scientists like Richard Dawkins and the fact that Luis Palau, the Western evangelist, is in discussion with a prominent atheist scientist, reinforces this impression. The scientist is also a senior civil servant in China where the church has grown exponentially and where the book has been published simultaneously with the US. After the success of the Beijing Olympics (not to mention the collapse of Western banking), China's global significance could not seem larger. Added to which the book looks great: high quality paper with lots of spectacular photographs. What potential for good, therefore, and all very impressive.

Yet the substance of the book disappoints in several ways.

First, it turns out that the dialogue (during the latter part of 2005) lasted only eight hours, not a lot of time when one thinks of the territory needing to be covered to avoid confusion.

Second, although the atmosphere of the conversations is excellent, both men being frank, amiable and respectful throughout, one never feels that Palau gets to the root of Zhao Qizheng's scientific materialism. He presents biblical doctrine, of course, and the gospel comes through clearly, but the level of intellectual challenge is meagre.

More seriously, one wonders what the object of the exercise is. If it is simply to record a 'friendly dialogue' between a Christian and an atheist why produce a glossy book? Surely a personal conversation like this has eternal value just by itself whether the intellectual element is what it should be or not. Love and respect have been expressed. Palau has gained an admirer and friend. The contact has been real and may continue. All good! But the object of the book is more than this. 'Maybe I can summarise [our] remarks', says Zhao Qizheng. '... The differences between atheism and theism do not constitute an obstacle to our friendship. The common objective of the theists and atheists is to promote global harmony.' Clearly the first sentence is right: Christians can and ought to bridge all boundaries of belief. But what about global harmony: is this a priority for the believer in the way it evidently is for our Chinese friend? The one-time vice-mayor of Shanghai describes 'the Chinese people building a socialist society ... a harmonious society, in which the various religions in China help to promote harmony...'

We immediately think of the long history of persecution in China and of Zhao's statement that 'cults ... are evil organisations'. Well, what constitutes a cult we wonder – evangelicalism and the house church movement maybe? And we remember that, during the recent Olympics, Shi Weihuan, an evangelical bookshop owner in Beijing, was labelled 'a dangerous religious element' and cruelly mistreated. How does that square with 'global harmony', one wonders? But nothing of this darker side of China ever appears in the dialogue. It is all sweetness and light. The object of the book seems to be to show how much China has changed – as if it weren't any longer a

police state. Add this overarching political naivety to its apologetic limitations and the gloss starts to pall a bit.

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