



*A journalist fresh from reporting the war in Afghanistan gets an assignment that saves his life*

by Gerard Condon

**I**F YOU met God face to face, what would you talk about? That is the intriguing premise of this art-house movie that was released in America last year. Sounds familiar? Back in 1977 George Burns was a bespectacled Lord God in the hit comedy *Oh, God!* Morgan Freeman played the part in *Bruce Almighty* (2003) and *Evan Almighty* (2007). In these outings the presence of God was proven by spectacular feats. *An Interview with God* has few comedy moments and no obvious miracles. Here we are challenged to think about the subtler ways that God's presence can shape our lives.

The movie opens with Paul Asher (Brenton Thwaites), a youthful 'religion columnist' with a New York newspaper on the flight home from Afghanistan. He had been embedded with the US Army and now, inside the cavernous military transport, he shines a torch on the coffins of his fallen compatriots. His work in Af-

ghanistan has added to his reputation as a journalist, but has also led him into a crisis of faith. His personal life, too, is in something of a mess. His wife, Sarah (Yael Grobglas), is about to leave him because, we suspect, he has neglected their relationship. Even now, reunited in their Brooklyn apartment, he seems to be more concerned with helping Matt, a secret-service operative he befriended in Afghanistan, than paying attention to her.

Paul loves his bike and, by way of connecting the principal scenes of this movie, we see him weave his way through the streets of Manhattan: trips that are almost as dangerous as being in a war zone! His latest assignment is a bizarre one: "three interviews, over three days, at three locations" with "the Man" (as he is listed in the cast), who claims to be God.

### Day One

Paul is late for his first interview, but the Man (David Strathairn) is

waiting patiently, as God does, at a public chessboard. For the record Paul asks him to say and spell his name. The Man leans towards the microphone: "I'm God... G.O.D.", and then looks up to Paul with a smirk, as if to say, "believe that, if you dare." Paul smiles too and then sets about asking his prepared questions, such as, "What is the meaning of life? (answer: "To live, to struggle, to serve God, and to ask questions like 'What's the meaning of life?'); "Is heaven real?" (answer: "Real? Yes, but try not to think of it as a place") and, "What about the devil?" (answer: "Satan is overrated. He only has power to the extent that you give it to him.") To the question: "Can an atheist be a moral person?" the Man answers, "Sure. And you can build a home on no foundation and just hope that the earth never shakes."

The Man partly conforms to our stereotypical image for God: an elderly grey-haired gent who cares for his children. But this "deity," as he calls himself, is clean-shaven and wears an elegant suit, like a Wall Street trader. There are hints that not all is as real as it seems. It could be that Paul, like his friend Matt, is suffering

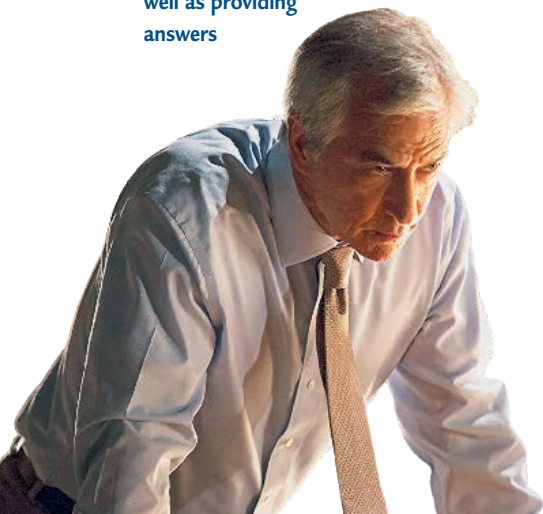
from Post-Traumatic-Stress-Disorder (PTSD) and may be hallucinating the interviews. Then again, the viewer is left with just enough doubt to think that the conversations are for real. The matter is clarified, to an extent, when Paul cycles back to the newspaper office. His editor, Gary (Hill Harper), reminds Paul that he is on leave, following his trauma in Afghanistan, but agrees to publish the interviews with God in the newspaper's lifestyle section, as a work of fiction dressed up as fact.

## Day Two

The second interview takes place on the stage of a large empty theatre, the place where Paul's mother once worked. Wanting to keep a professional distance, Paul gets annoyed that the Man keeps making the journalist's own life "the topic of this conversation." So, while Paul is able to give a theologically correct definition of salvation (the topic of the second interview), he is too proud to accept his personal need for divine assistance. The Man insists that salvation is meant for this life, as well as the next. It can only happen when we acknowledge our weakness.

On his return to the office, Paul's sister-in-law, Grace (Charlbi Dean Kriek), confides that Sarah left Paul because she had been unfaithful to him. The revelation saddens Paul as much as it angers him. It sets the

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scene for the question that is most asked of God: "Why are bad things allowed happen to good people?"

## Day Three

The final interview takes place in the storage room of a hospital. Paul mutters a phrase in Italian, just to check if the Man is as omniscient (knows all things) as he claims to be. On the question of the all-powerful (omnipotent) God allowing evil to exist, the Man replies that most of the suffering in the world is man's own responsibility, not God's. It is by following God's will that we limit the misery of our fallen world: "You have more power than you know, Paul. Food can be grown, wars ended, a troubled veteran can be helped and a marriage saved."

Finally, the signs that God is real, if invisible, become a little more obvious. Like the New Testament apostle that the journalist is named after, Paul's attitude is transformed by a blinding light and he learns to trust that all will be well, even if his bike is stolen. It turns out that the most powerful signs of God's presence are the everyday miracles brought about by an enduring faith and the ability to forgive others.

## Production values

Ken Aguado's intelligent screenplay has been novelised and this movie has a website (<https://aninterviewwithgod.com>) with a discussion guide for adult education groups. The

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thought-provoking tone of the film is enhanced by an evocative musical score. The direction by Perry Lang is adroit and makes for an engaging viewing experience.

The two leading actors carry the movie to such an extent that the supporting cast barely figure. Up-and-coming Australian, Brenton Thwaites, portrays a tetchy young man, who is transformed by the insights gained from religion. Strathairn brings the same dignity to this role that he showed as a courageous newscaster in *Good Night and Good Luck* (2005). In this outing, he portrays a God who is kind, yet challenging, one who interrogates our experience as well as providing answers.

I would have preferred if the Man had styled himself as an angel rather than God. In the Biblical and Catholic tradition, it is angels who are sent to guide and protect us and to represent God's presence, as the Man does in this movie. There are all too few references to Christ, the unique bringer of God's salvation, and none to the organised community of believers, the Church. It seems like this movie is aimed at the widest possible audience in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Catholics, too, however, will appreciate its invitation to reflection on our image of God. ♦