

Atheists Invite Evangelist Ray Comfort Into Their “Comfort Zone” in Orlando

The street preacher’s unusual guest appearance at the American Atheists conference in April drew applause, sneers

Evangelist Ray Comfort stepped into the lion’s den armed with a can of Coca-Cola and a banana. While most Christians were marking Easter with special church services, the California-based street preacher and tract publisher was crossing swords with America’s most zealous atheists at their national conference—held on Good Friday.

Comfort—whose radical ministry was profiled in the May issue of *Charisma*—had been invited to debate the existence of God with Ron Barrier, national spokesman for American Atheists (AA), the organization founded by the late Madalyn Murray O’Hair. Renowned for her 1963 lawsuit that led to the banning of school prayer, she prided herself on being “the most hated woman in America.”

The exchange at AA’s annual gathering in Orlando, Fla., drew around 200 supporters of the organization and some 30 Christians who attended to pray and offer moral support to Comfort. He arrived with free copies of a specially printed edition of his book *How to Make an Atheist Backslide*, with a front cover “endorsement” by Barrier that was taken from correspondence between the two, in which Barrier proclaimed it

an “idiot book.”

Comfort told the audience that he rejected religion, which was associated with ignorance, intolerance and superstition. “I would rather be called stumpy than religious,” he said.

Comfort’s humor drew laughter and applause at first—but the reception got decidedly chillier as he went on to challenge evolution and atheism’s foundations and when he quoted Scripture.

He produced a Coca-Cola can and presented his “theory” of how it came into existence—formed by chance over millions of years. To believe that was “to move into an intellect-free zone,” he said, “to have brain liposuction.” Then he pulled out from his jacket pocket what he called “the atheist’s nightmare”—a banana.

Comfort said the banana, like the Coca-Cola can, had been cleverly designed for human use—and, unlike the can, was biodegradable.

“The building is proof there is a builder. You don’t need faith to believe in a builder. All you need is eyes that can see and a brain that works,” he said. “When you look at creation you can see order from the atom through the universe.”

Comfort quoted Sir Isaac Newton, Albert Einstein and contemporary scientist Stephen Hawking in his presentation and seized on a mistake by Barrier to make one of his points. After Barrier had accidentally picked up Comfort’s spectacles while making his case, Comfort in his response told the

audience: "If you are an atheist, you are wearing someone else's glasses. You are not seeing things clearly."

Some members of the audience laughed and booed as Comfort spoke about sin and the need for salvation. In the question-and-answer sessions one man challenged Comfort to eat some strychnine-laced peanuts he offered, to prove the veracity of the gospel passage that claimed Jesus' followers would be able to drink poison and not be affected. Comfort declined, but said: "I know where I'm going if I do eat them."

Barrier made some barbed comments during his presentations, but also offered some lighter moments. When a sound glitch interrupted his speech, he looked up and quipped: "I thought that was it. I thought I was being taken away." Barrier said that Comfort had appealed to people's emotions but failed to offer a single shred of evidence that God existed.

"Death does not scare atheists," he said. "There's a big difference between believing something and wanting to know something. For the atheist such issues as faith...[don't] work out. We want to experience it. Because this is, in fact, the only life we have, and we can't be wasting time on 'what ifs' when we have so much to know about what is."

The two men concluded their duel by shaking hands and hugging. Later Comfort said that he had been grateful for the warm reception he had received. "Getting in there was no problem, it was getting out I was worried about," he laughed. "[But] they were very gracious. It was an opportunity to give God's Word uncompromisingly to some who usually wouldn't listen." (To listen to the debate on the Web go to).

The three-day AA event also featured the premiere of a new film, Blasphemy, billed as a movie with “something to offend everyone.” The conference began with a memorial service for O’Hair, whose death was confirmed in January with the discovery of human remains in Texas. She and two members of her family had disappeared in 1995, along with about \$500,000.

Ironically, the same weekend O’Hair was being remembered, son William, named in the 1963 suit, was speaking to Christians in another part of the state. Now a believer and founder of the Religious Freedom Coalition, he spoke at a church school in St. Petersburg.