

Taking Jesus to the Fringes: The Atheist Challenge



When Ray Comfort started the Comfort Food blog, he intended to encourage Christians. But so many atheists kept leaving notes that the blog morphed into Atheist Central, a daily offering of questions and barbs from atheists.

The only rule: Comfort deletes blasphemous or uncivil messages and those in which “God” or “Jesus” isn’t capitalized. He deflects some postings; others are deflected by Christians who monitor the site.

Comfort recently released a compilation of their questions in his book *You Can Lead an Atheist to Evidence but You Can’t Make Him Think*.

“Every atheist is a friend,” says Comfort, whose Living Waters is an evangelism resource and training ministry. “If Jesus can call Judas ‘friend’ as he betrayed Him with a kiss, I can call anyone a friend. I try to reach out to them as much as I can.”

As he admits, that friendship is often one-sided, since he says many atheists are hostile or bitter toward God and His followers. Some don’t find him that persuasive, either.

Michael Doss, president of Orange County (California) Atheists—which hosted Comfort for a discussion last year—says the logic of the evangelist’s arguments was deeply flawed. Nor did any of his evidence change anyone’s mind, Doss says.

“I didn’t get any sense of ‘deep caring’ for atheists in particular,” says Doss, also state director for American Atheists. “He might want to lay off the insults (as in his recent book titles and themes) if he really ‘cares’ for us.”

Still, Comfort delights in how his critics provided him a national platform by ridiculing him and hurtling their critiques around cyberspace.

"I don't know if there's any other Christian that has a whole stack of atheists every day, waiting for every word that he's got to say to jump on to," says Comfort, whose blog receives about 100 e-mails a day.

"Some Christians have asked, 'Why are you wasting your time? ... [Because] there are a lot of people who are listening. The blog gets copied and pasted and passed on to other sites.'"

The questions run the gamut of those who like to pick apart Scripture, argue that conscience is instilled by authority figures, don't believe mankind is intrinsically evil or call obedience to God "fear mongering." Some border on hysterical, like the writer who said, "You're an (expletive)" before launching into a diatribe about how Comfort scares people.

"You're a joke; take a good look in the mirror before you go out judging others," he wrote. "Who knows, that may be you burning in hell's eternal flames, and your little (expletive) buddy too."

Comfort replies that skeptics don't take into account such questions as: What if hell exists? What if the Bible is right? What if God is holy and just and will punish unrepentant murderers and rapists in a terrible place called hell?

"If I am fully persuaded that someone is in terrible danger, I have to at least warn them," he says. One reader asks how he feels about Jews: "I don't believe they're hell-bound; do you?"

Comfort, whose mother was Jewish, says listeners often pose this question when he preaches. Pointing out that all the disciples were Jewish, he replies that eternal life is offered to all, regardless of religion, color or gender.

The questions come to him in person too. During 2007 he visited 13 other countries to film episodes for the upcoming season of his TV program, *The Way of the Master*, co-hosted by actor Kirk Cameron.

"Much of Europe is becoming atheistic," Comfort says. "A lot of street interviews we did were with people who professed

atheism, but when you start probing they can't tell you why they're an atheist."

One of Europe's most famous nonbelievers is Oxford University biologist Richard Dawkins, whose 2006 best-seller, *The God Delusion*, released in paperback last January. Comfort has offered the scientist \$20,000 for a 30-minute debate about God's existence.

Though Dawkins hasn't responded, he reportedly told one audience he would do it for a \$100,000 donation to his foundation.

"I would love to do that debate because it would be such a wonderful opportunity for the gospel," Comfort says.

So too should Christians everywhere be ready to offer an explanation of the hope that lives within them, Comfort says. Those who do should respond kindly, obeying the biblical command not to strive but to be gentle with all men, including those who oppose them, Comfort says.

"My agenda isn't to have someone change their mind about belief in God," he says. "What we need to do with atheists is not change their mind about their belief in God's existence but to show them they have offended God and desperately need a Savior. That's my agenda."