

Wonder

Volume: 1 Number: 1 Theme: **Engaging Modern Atheism**
Title: **“How to ‘Grill the Christian’”** Author: **Mr. Andrew Boyd**

Forty students sauntered into a meeting room in the library at the University of Connecticut on an unseasonably cold October evening. Three figures seated behind a small table greeted them. On the right was a man in jeans and a button-down shirt, in the middle was a woman in a clergy shirt complimented by her pink sweater and a kitten pin, and on the left was a man with a beard in a black cassock. Students had come into this room to have their questions answered. And the three people at the front sat ready to get grilled.

Medium or Well-Done?

In my years as a college student, this activity was undoubtedly our most meaningful and most successful. We had rented a meeting room, found three clergy, and invited the campus to come and ask them anything they wanted. We titled the event “Grill the Christian” hoping that would attract some attention in itself. We didn’t know quite what to expect, and the event actually surpassed our expectations. Questions, while sometimes pointed or loaded, were overall genuine and reflected a campus full of students looking for answers and guidance. The questions ranged from practical (how do we read the bible?), to personal (why did you go into ministry?), to philosophical (why does God allow suffering?). Most importantly, the three clergy we invited worked together to provide strong answers that of course left the audience with more to think about. This event can be done easily, and with little cost either in a college setting like OCF or even in a parish.

When we publicized the event, we were sure to be very clear that it was free, open to everyone, and not any type of worship service. Often, other Christian groups would advertise an event like ours, and trick people into coming to a worship service instead. It was important for our group to be upfront and honest with our local community. Below are some other tips we found useful in planning this particular event:

Choose Wisely

Our Group had spent significant time selecting the three clergy that we invited to be “grilled.” We chose specific clergy that we had pre-existing relationships with, people we knew. When looking at local Orthodox clergy, we chose one who was articulate and engaging, but most importantly, was excited about the prospect. The female Episcopalian priest was a local campus minister who was known to our group, and had helped us out with previous events. The other clergyman was a local, well-known evangelical pastor. He was an Alumnus of our school, charismatic and intelligent. We also gave the clergy a few minutes together before the event to get to know each other better.

Create Questions

We were surprised at the initial timidity in the room, when the time for the event came. College students are usually brazen and opinionated, but faced with three members of the clergy, willing to absorb whatever was thrown their way, there was only silence. Our OCF had fortunately created a back-up plan. The week before, we had composed a list of twenty questions that we would have liked to ask of our invited clergy. Of course, this event was not our own forum for getting our questions answered, we had that every week in our regular meetings. Rather, this event was something we offered to the greater community. Still, we wanted

questions to fall back on just in case. I asked the first one off of our list, and that broke the ice. From the next two hours, and in fact until campus security told us they had to lock up, questions flowed from the audience. Conversation even continued outside the building after the event.

Moderate Well

Part of the reason our event was successful was that we had it moderated well. We chose two people from our group to act as moderator and time keeper respectively. We limited each person to one question either directed at all of the clergy or one in particular. We limited the response to five minutes total. The moderator was dressed nicely, and was welcoming and friendly. He also used his discernment to see when discussions should continue a little longer than five minutes. We had also consulted with our invited clergy prior to the event and came up with a very short list of rules that they were comfortable with.

Follow Up

This event happened over a year ago, and I still communicate with people I met that night. It is important to follow up with people if you can. Invite people to your weekly OCF meeting if they still have unanswered questions. Talk to people after the meeting; start conversation with people whose questions you found interesting. Take interest in the people who come to you with questions.

Discussion Questions:

What questions would you ask at an event like this?

What would it take to host an event like this in your parish or on your campus?

Do you think this is a good idea for outreach? Why or why not?