

Pucker Up Protest

When causes collide: atheist convention, turned Muslim protest, turned gay rights smooch.
Tim Warrington reports.

In April 2012, the Global Atheist Convention, dubbed *A Celebration Of Reason*, was held in Melbourne. The get-together attracted Australian and international speakers including, best-selling author Richard Dawkins, gay comedian Tom Ballard and Sex Party founder Fiona Patten. The event typified Australia's relaxed attitude towards religion – live and let live – believe or don't believe.

Nevertheless, organisers and attendees expected some protests. There was one small, polite group of Christian activists, and a larger group of banner-waving Islamic fundamentalists, whose placards read, "Atheism Is The Cancer, Islam Is The Answer" and "Atheism Is A Mental Illness." These protestors were not just there to rally against atheism, they also denounced the validity of all faiths apart from Islam. One banner read, "Islam, The Only Monotheistic Religion."

The Muslim protest was also significant in that there were no female protestors among the contingent. This was noticed by the atheist convention-goers, some of

whom began chanting, "Where are the women?" Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who spoke at the convention on the rights of Muslim women, said Saudi Arabian women were protected from harm in the afterlife "because it was impossible to go to hell twice".

Come lunchtime on the final day of the

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convention, the hungry atheists adjourned for refreshments, only to find security guards and barred exits. They were quickly ushered out another exit. Curious at the noise, many of the convention attendees went to investigate.

According to participant Gregory Storer, they were faced with an ill-tempered crowd of Muslim protesters. "This was a different sort of protest. It was not peaceful. It was not harmless. It was a concerted, angry, organised attack on the convention, on atheism and on freedom from religion," says Gregory. "What it amounted to was a full-on mob who believed that Islam was the only way and anything else and anyone else was unacceptable."

Security guards struggled to keep the two groups apart. The three-day convention had attracted more than 5,000 people and the guards and Muslim activists were heavily outnumbered. Retreating behind their banners, the protestors chanted pro-Islamic slogans. It was then that Storer and his partner Michael Barnett decided to lock lips. According to Storer, "My partner Michael and I took advantage of the moment to kiss in front of the group. We understand that in some Islamic states gay people are persecuted and executed for their sexuality. It was an ideal opportunity to challenge the notion of acceptance and tolerance. As we began kissing, the Muslims began chanting, 'Burn in hell.' It's crazy that in Australia such bigoted homophobia is allowed to exist. It amazes me that these men can hide behind their religion and use it as a weapon to victimise and condemn people without being challenged."

Although vocal and noisy, the confrontation was not violent. However, security guards did restrain some from the atheist crowd and a woman who threw herself at the Muslim protestors was lead away.

Within 48 hours, the controversial kiss started appearing on blogs and news sites around the world. The image received almost 250,000 hits on Reddit.com. The image also went viral on Facebook and Twitter, where it was shared and re-tweeted over and over.

After the event Storer said, "It was an extremely powerful and peaceful statement of love in the face of pure hate. Love will always conquer hate."



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