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How to be a Mormon



A comedian continues his climb towards enlightenment in Shaun Micallef's Stairway to Heaven

By
Shane Cubis

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It's always a bit odd when comics get serious, and doubly so when they first enter the national consciousness with characters like Milo Kerrigan and David McGahan. But with his stupidly clever wordplay, deft combination of physical comedy and straight man delivery, plus his ability to pull very serious faces, Shaun Micallef has always stood out from the gag-dealing pack.

And now, after dipping his toe into both the Ganges and a life of Hinduism with the first episode of the 3-part series *Shaun Micallef's Stairway to Heaven*, the man who made Bill Shorten's Zingers a source of national pride has returned for another round of soul-searching, in the hopes of finding his way to Heaven (or Nirvana, Valhalla or the Happy Hunting Grounds).

This time he's undertaking his spiritual quest in the heart of America – in Salt Lake City, to be precise, where he tries on a Mormon lifestyle for size. But if you thought you'd learnt everything you need to know about the religion from Trey Parker and Matt Stone, you might be in for a surprise or two.



If there's one word to describe Shaun's on-screen persona, it's "affable". He pokes a bit of fun and makes his usual absurdist jokes here and there, but overall you're watching a man who seems genuinely interested in exploring the pros and cons of a belief system. Even when he's probing his subjects on whether they *literally* believe the Bible stories they follow, he's happy to let their responses stand without too much dissection.

Possibly as a result of this friendly attitude, Shaun's welcomed into the home and church of a Mormon family, and everyone appears to get on great. Generally speaking, he takes on the role of an interested, open-minded candidate for the faith, and in return the super-friendly Mormons let him know how they feel about things like drinking, homosexuality and having less than a dozen children (spoiler: they're not in favour of any of it).

But Shaun also isn't a pilgrim to do things by halves. After taking part in a typical Mormon family's life and singing along with their famous Tabernacle Choir, he joins some fresh-faced youngsters on an international mission of conversion, landing in Fiji to talk the locals round to Joseph Smith's view of the cosmos.

Oh, and he takes some time out – with a magically reappearing beard, no less – to talk polygamy with a friendly triad of believers who have produced 17 little saints between them. With that lapine rate of reproduction, the religion shows no signs of dying out in the next generation, which makes it a safe bet if you're looking for a like-minded community of believers.

That said, at no point do you feel like he will actually convert to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, but Shaun develops an appreciation for their openness and lack of hard-sell proselytising. They've had nearly 200 years to practice, so they should be pretty good at conversion-by-stealth by now.

Climb *Shaun Micallef's Stairway to Heaven* at 8:30pm on Wednesday 18 January on SBS.

<https://www.sbs.com.au/guide/article/2017/01/11/how-be-mormon>