

This was published 4 years ago

Shaun Micallef's Stairway to Heaven: the comedian asks the big questions about the meaning of life



By [Kerrie O'Brien](#)

January 6, 2017 – 11.08am

The Australian comedian renews his quest for spiritual meaning in *Shaun Micallef's Stairway to Heaven*. Hinduism and India was his first port of call. In this second instalment he embeds himself with a Mormon family, meets Christian doomsday preppers in the US and finally communes with spirit healers in Brazil. The idea of working out whether there's a meaning to life appealed to him, so he wanted to go into the believers' territory and immerse himself in their world. His research involved reading the Bible – "just the Old Testament" – for a second time, as well as the weighty tome that is *The Book of Mormon*.

KB: Did you end up with a favourite religion?



Shaun Micallef in *Stairway To Heaven*, season 2.

SM: No. I think I probably ended up where I was originally, which is suspicious of religion. I did come away from the very first series I did in India, which really kind of made sense to me, and that was to divest yourself of material things as you live your life, that made sense to me.

I'm never going to talk anyone out of some spiritual experience. If someone told me God spoke to them, I am interested in that. It's not my job. I'd probably draw the line if they said why don't you live like this but good

luck to them, If people can find peace and harmony in their life, then good luck to them.

KB: What do you say to the idea that religion is about being good and doing good?

SM: I think it's nice to think that everybody's on a different road to the same end but I don't think that's terribly accurate. At the end of the day I think most religions are about organising people and getting people to behave in a certain way.

KB: What struck me about the Mormon family was how regular it seemed. Yes, there were two wives and 17-odd children but it was quite normal (apart from how freakishly well behaved the kids were).

SM: Yes. They'd blown a hole in the side of a mountain and built a house to live in but apart from that it was normal.

KB: Do you keep in mind that you're making this program for a fairly cynical audience?

SM: I think television is a cold medium; it's a cynical medium as well. Anyone watching television these days has a slight sneer around their lips. But I am hopeful that this isn't a program that's like one of those awful reality programs. I think and I hope that it actually has a genuine curiosity underlying it. I think the audience shares that, and if they do they will enjoy the show. I got a different read on the religion from what I already knew.

KB: You do get a sense of these people through the series.

SM: I think once you do actually meet the people it becomes about a different thing. It's not about the religion as much it's about the effect of that on the people and what they take from it. I still envy that, I don't share that. I did have a crack at it, I really did try to buy into the whole thing. Once you start asking questions about the root of the plant, it's a bit of an easy game – for me, that's the problem. I don't think it's right, but I'd like to feel that it is. That's the tug-of-war that goes on with a lot of this, I think. Especially at Christmas time, we hear the choir singing and you feel a little bit closer to there being some grand architect to the whole thing.

Religion... is fraught with this siege mentality. Ultimately people should be able to think for themselves. Ever since people have been able to read, increasingly people are the masters of their own destiny and don't have to be told how to live their lives.

KB: Tell me about your spirituality.

SM: This brace of three documentaries was a bit more manageable for me, in part because I speak the same language. The Indian one was all through translators and it was very strange and exotic. Whereas with these, I had a frame of reference, I knew a bit about them. If someone quoted a passage to me, I could say, yes, but what about the next one? I guess I've ended up dismantling and then reassembling to an extent my own faith. We all do that as we approach different states of adulthood. I can't remember who said it but 'A life unexamined is not worth living'. I think it is really important to pull apart those things, and maybe one of the benefits of a secular world is that you feel you have the right to do that. You don't have the fear – you can ask a question, you can reject something as being unlikely or irrational or unfair or cruel or stupid. You can look at these things and say 'Well that's just dumb'. You're not gonna get struck by lightning for being reasonable.

WHAT **Shaun Micallef's Stairway to Heaven**

WHEN **SBS, January 18**



Kerrie O'Brien is a senior culture writer at The Age and The Sydney Morning Herald. Connect via [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#) or [email](#).
