



ME EATING HARE KRISHNA FOOD. ALL PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

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Identity

## I Road-Tested Three Cults Around Melbourne

Am I a Moonie, a Scientologist, or a Hare Krishna?

AS By Angela Skujins

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Fringe religions aren't so easy to find these days. I feel like in the 1970s, when the smell of Aquarianism was still in the air, it was easy to track down a good quality commune or guru. But the word "cult" has forced so many underground, and that's a problem. Not just for those looking to avoid cults, but for those looking to join. With this in mind, I thought I'd go and road test three easy-to-find cults around Melbourne. To be clear: These are organisations that have been labeled "cults" by others, not me. I'm keen on giving these places a chance, and rating them on their overall friendliness and fun-ness.

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## The Moonies



The Family Federation for World Peace and Unification (FFWPU), or the Moonies, as they're more commonly known, were founded in 1954 by a South Korean Christian fanatic named Sun Myung Moon. He claims he was visited by Jesus Christ and asked to complete the prophet's good work, from which Moon created the organisation's Divine Principle—which says that only unconditional love can lead to happiness. It's also important to note that Moon lived in an opulent New York mansion, which was famous for hosting some fairly hedonistic parties, until he was sentenced to 18 months prison for tax evasion in the 1980s. In the years since, the group has also been accused of emotional abuse by several ex-members.

Still, don't knock it till you've tried it, so I attended a six and half hour Moonies conference.



The conference was held in the lobby of an outer suburban hotel. I arrived to find a surprisingly large crowd bustling around, many of whom were holding flags. A woman named Jenny came up to me and handed over two flags: one for China and one for Vanuatu. "Whatever happens the flags cannot touch the ground," she instructed. I didn't really get it but I carried the flags around and didn't let them touch the ground.



MY NEW MOONIE PAL, HIROMI.

Carrying the flags around is how I met a 27-year-old second-generation Moonie named Hiromi. She was from Melbourne but her mum has been a Moonie since a trip to Japan. When I asked about her motivations she shrugged and simply said, "Mum." She also said she liked the group's emphasis on giving back to the community, which influenced her to become a nurse.

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But something slipped when she said she found her Brazilian husband through the Church. "We were married when I was 21," she added proudly.

didn't want to indulge my interest.

Then it was time for the Bridge of Peace Ceremony. According to the conference's brochure, the ceremony, "heals wounds of the past, builds lasting friendships, and resolves conflict passed on from generation to generation." Essentially, what happens is the Sisters, or Brothers, exchange a rose and embrace inside a wire frame thing. The ceremony symbolises resolving tension between people, and Hiromi and I followed suit and it felt warm and comforting. The room clapped and whistled. A woman afterwards offered me a croissant. Everyone seemed so giving.

Leaving, I felt pretty good about the cult's impassioned pleas for universal love. And like anyone, I did enjoy the odd rose, flag, and pastry. I also appreciated their emphasis on family, and started thinking about how I should call my mum more. Overall I left feeling positive about the Moonies, and I'd recommend them to anyone who just wants a hug.



You might have heard of these guys. Scientology was founded in the 1950s by American sci-fi author L. Ron Hubbard, who taught that our fears, insecurities, and psychosomatic illnesses can be cleansed by better connecting with our souls, which are extraterrestrial in origin. The souls, also known as *thetan*, are immortal, and prior to arriving on Earth they existed inside aliens. Modern society doesn't realise this, so we misdiagnose ailments that could be better cured with Scientology.

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My Scientology Movie and Alex Gibney's Going Clear have revealed the ways the organisation has raised hundreds of millions off its members in a host of variously unethical and quasi-legal ways.



Still, unafraid, I headed to Melbourne's Church of Scientology in Ascot Vale for the free personality test. The building was immense and neatly manicured and apart from a suited Scientologist smoking a cigarette in the carpark, there wasn't a hair out of place. Everything just looked big and rich.

After entering the building I met Tanya, a 30-year old Scientology employee who directed me through the quiz. "Some people get nervous when they get here," she explained. "They see that it's a Scientology building and go oh, no... But Scientology is just knowing what you want."

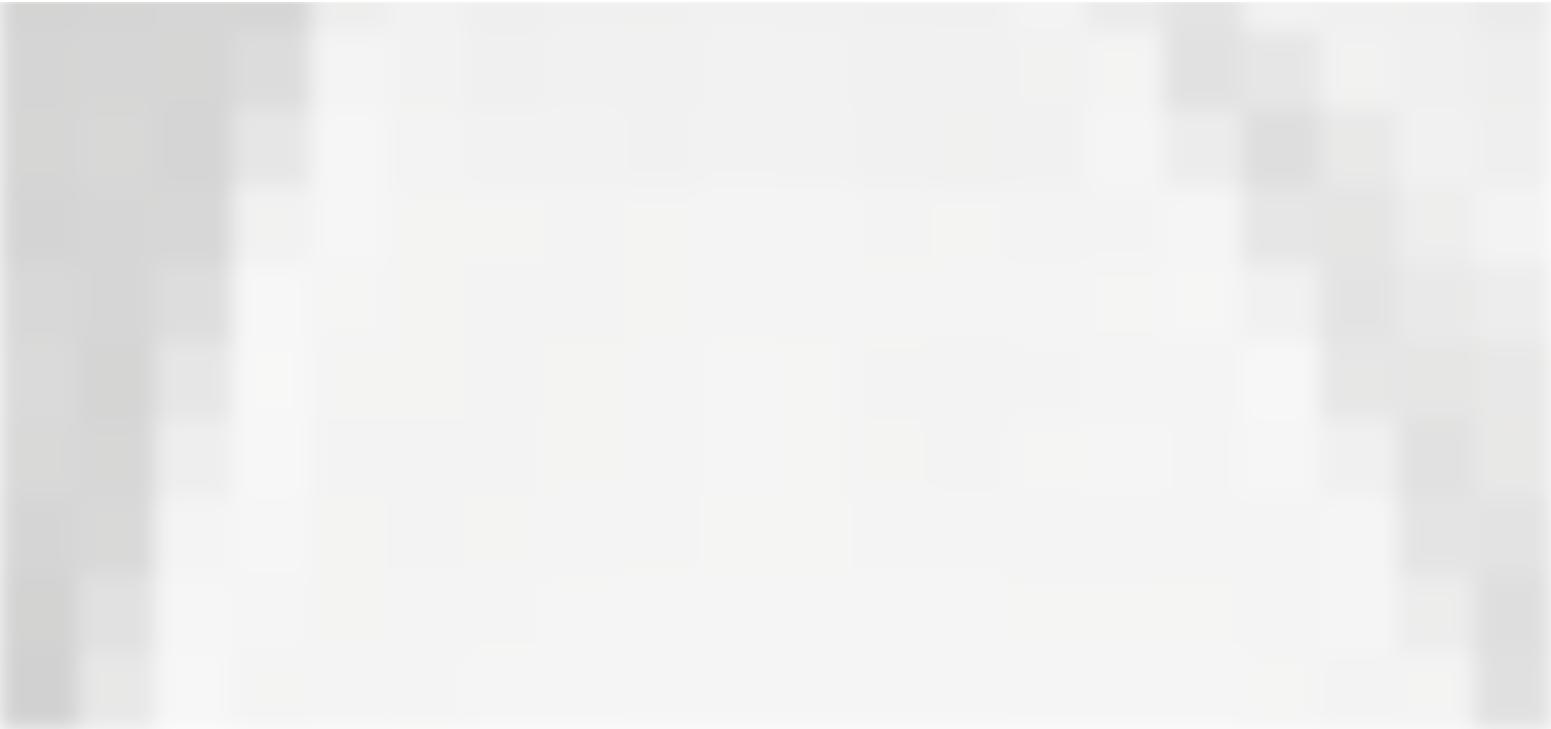
had a free personality test, and I had one of the sanest conversations I've ever had. I finally felt understood," she said.



Tanya sat me down in the Testing Room to start the 200-question quiz. It posed a range of questions such as "do you find yourself whistling at random moments?" and "do you enjoy inflicting pain on animals?" Classic stuff really. I guess they wanted to know if I was into music and sadism. I answered the questions with a yes, maybe, or no.

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Tanya read my answered to reveal that I'm stable but unhappy, anxious, and I have a problem trusting people. I felt her reflections reinforced these feelings and suddenly I had no idea what I was doing in my life. She recommended that I take a \$55 take-home course, "Knowing Who You Can Trust," which could help me decipher what and who is toxic in my life.

Like a Tony Robbins seminar, Scientology seemed to offer empowerment at a price. It also offered people complete empathy, which is what I got off the Moonies too. With a little bit of wariness, I'd recommend this cult to the wayward traveller looking for perspective and a free coke. You'll just need to get past the stigma and maybe Scientology will be for you.

## **Hare Krishnas**



It was a Sunday night and my boyfriend and I didn't have enough money for UberEats. Like others who first meet the cult, we decide to pay a visit to the Hare Krishna temple for a plate of free food.

The Hare Krishna movement, or the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKON) originated in mid-16th century India, only to experience an American renaissance in the early 1930s, spearheaded by an Indian guru named Prabhupada. The movement's central idiom is that the Hindu god, Krishna, is the don of all demigods. Followers also claim that Krishna reigns true, and that the more you devote your life to your own anointed guru, the closer you'll get to reaching Krishna consciousness. The concept of Karma also looms large of followers of Hare Krishna, which explains the strict vegetarian diet. As a vegan, this is already a lifestyle choice I can get around, but perhaps not the reports of children being physically, emotionally, and sexually abused in Hare Krishna boarding schools.



One of the first things I saw when I arrived at the temple was the signage. One poster lauded a Hare Krishna Lifetime Membership, where for a mere \$1111 donation, devotees can be rewarded with select organisational perks. The deal includes three days of free accommodation in the South Bank temple, a personalised birthday greeting, and a gift basket including books, a framed Krishna picture, and a beaded bag. For a small fee you can live like a king for one percent of the year.



In the dining hall, an ultra-smiley volunteer served me a plate of curry and rice. It was undoubtedly the most nutritious meal I've had in months. Also, free food! After eating, the Hare Krishna guy asked me to join the others in the downstairs mantra room. I'm not really into chanting, but I realised it'd be rude to eat and not chant, so I headed downstairs to join in.

As the ensemble accelerated through the fifteenth cycle of the Hare Krishna mantra, I started to relax. I moved, I clapped, and I chanted. The musicians occasionally stopped to laugh at each other while a girl took pictures on her iPhone. Again, I was struck by a sense of solidarity. All the people in every one of these organisations seemed so much more open and giving than in regular life. They hugged, sung, and overshared easily — there's something about that which seems genuinely exciting.

So while I don't think I'll go back to any of the cults, I did get a sense of why people join. It's not for the orgies or the costumes or a taste of the divine, people join to feel utterly accepted. And feeling utterly accepted is a very powerful thing.

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