

Flying Free, by John Morgan

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John Morgan is a former member of the Worldwide Church of God, an association that dates back to his early childhood. His book, *Flying Free*, has had me engrossed for several days. I thought I'd heard it all, but John surprised me more than once.

I've read quite a few books by ex-WCG members. Some of them have been shattering (*Herbert Armstrong's Tangled Web* springs first to mind) while others have been facile. In recent years I've reviewed – favorably – Pam Dewey's *Field Guide* (an excellent primer on American religions), Dennis Embo's *The God that Prevailed* (a testimony by an ex-member who converted to Catholicism), and Henry Sturcke's *Encountering the Rest of God* (a theological dissertation.) I keep promising to put them online again (sorry Henry, I hope you haven't been holding your breath!) and hopefully that'll happen when I find a bit of spare time. Good people, good books.

Then there are the less worthy tomes: Willie Dankenbring's stuff, Fred Coulter's New Testament "translation", and a copy of *Peter's Story* - I still have yet to crack open the covers on that one. These are filed away in box where I can blissfully ignore them, side by side with ancient "literature" sanctioned by the church.

Flying Free is in a category of its own. I can honestly say my expectations were exceeded. In fact I've read nothing quite like it before. The author captures the spirit of growing up in the old WCG. Looking at it through his eyes put a lot of things in a fresh light, and as I read through the first chapters I found myself thinking: man, we really **were** weird!

Chapter 4 on the marks of a cult (using Steven Hassan's experiences as an ex-Moonie) was among the clearest I've come across. Chapter 6, addressing HWA's genuineness (or lack thereof) is excellent.

I was blessed with the rare opportunity to come into the church during an atypically "liberal" period. It lasted a few brief years – an Indian Summer of relative sanity – then was swept away in the "cultural revolution" that saw Garner Ted dumped, Stan Rader facing off against the State of California and Herbert taking a final extended trip into megalomania. I didn't hang around much longer – Christ was using an extremely caustic "spot remover" to tart up his Bride, and the local minister wisely decided I was a definite liability (thanks Jack, you did me a favor!)

I mention that because your experience of the WCG is determined to some extent by *when* you were actively involved. John was there long before me as a kid growing up in the "Truth", and stayed with the church through till the changes. With a measured style he sets about detailing his story – our story – with great fairness. Warning: if you're anything like me you'll be entering the "flashback zone." So many things I'd forgotten about. So many fanatical teachings, so much manipulation! Being a part of the church came at a cost. If it wasn't so

What's the beef (so to speak) with Marmite?

"Then there was Lev 17:12: "None of you may eat blood", so we could not eat marmite – a breakfast spread containing dried blood – or black pudding."

I remember some of the urban legends that circulated in WCG, related in that peculiarly sincere tone of voice and received with a wide-eyed "is that so!" But this is one I hadn't heard. The local version of this pungent spread (a yeast extract) is

completely vegetarian (produced by the fastidious Seventh-day Adventist company *Sanitarium*, which promotes a vegetarian lifestyle.) It seems New Zealand WCG members were led to believe that it contained blood products "from the pulpit."

Recollections vary (was *Vegemite* the forbidden brand?) but at least one minister remembers giving such advice. Bad enough for any Kiwi to be deprived of whitebait and sausage rolls, but to forego Marmite sandwiches on a misunderstanding... oh the pain! John's statement accurately reflects what passed for church lore at the time, but also illustrates just how incredibly silly much ministerial advice actually was at the time.



downright tragic it'd be hilarious.

Unlike some others, John isn't pushing a particular barrow, nor is there a sense of bitterness. It seems he just wants to put it all "on the record", and he does a magnificent job. No nutty conspiracy theories or cheap apologetics, no strange interpretations of Bible passages, just an amazing story, all the more bizarre for its familiarity. There's also a personal touch to John's account. You can't miss the fact that this church, these doctrines, had an effect on real families, people just like you and me. The personal asides add a great deal to *Flying Free*.

And oh, those quotes! I'd forgotten just how blatant a lot of Herb's writing was. The thinly veiled threats of eternal damnation if we didn't do this or that. I read them again with a sense of disbelief... was I really taken in by this rubbish?

Flying Free is generally supportive of the new WCG, but the discussion on tithing also makes it clear that Joe Jnr's position on that subject is backtracking on a commitment to freedom.

John is the only person I know who can proudly state that he no longer attends any church, and is better off for the fact!

"When I talk to fellow Christians, and they find out that I no longer attend any church, most of them look on me as someone in need of spiritual help. They look on me as a weaker Christian – if a Christian at all! They talk to me as though I have fallen from a position of spiritual strength.

"The truth is the opposite. I feel spiritually stronger now, than at any other time in my life. I feel that a Christian who doesn't attend a physical church, has a spiritual freedom that churchgoers probably are unable to experience."

I've often *thought* that, but saying it publicly is something else. Chapter 7 is intriguing. It seems clear that the author is still a Bible believing Christian in the first pages, and then **wham**, he launches into a very useful discussion on the gaping holes in Biblicism. It's this balanced approach that makes the book unique. You might not agree with John on everything, but you surely have to respect his position.

Being chained to a whiteboard most of the working week, I really have issues with writers who can't be bothered with spelling or proof reading. So it was a delight to find this self-published work was virtually bullet-proof. I can't argue with John's account of the way it was: it's honest and accurate. I liked the fact that *Flying Free* avoids polemic (something I'm frequently guilty of) and preachiness.

My advice? Get a copy.