Belief-Omatic as Spiritual Guide

- homily on Sun., Sep 20, 2015 at Capital UU Congregation – Peter Scales

My purpose today is to inform and inspire you to think about how we choose religions in the 21st century. Unitarian Universalists hold as a guiding principle “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning,” and this morning I will describe one tool we can use for our personal searches, and to help others.

What is the Belief-O-Matic? Even if YOU don't know what faith you are, Belief-O-Matic® knows. Answer 20 questions about your concept of God, the afterlife, human nature, and more, and Belief-O-Matic® will tell you what religion (if any) you practice...or ought to consider practicing [Beliefnet]. It's a quiz consisting of 20 multiple choice questions about God, the origin of life on earth, abortion, homosexuality, divorce and so on. You answer the questions and rate each one's level of importance: high, medium or low. A data base measures the answers against the key principles of 27 religions. Within seconds, the program serves up a list of religions ranked by how closely they match your answers. [Sharon Tubbs, St. Petersburg Times, 2002]

Beliefnet was founded in 1999 by magazine publisher Robert Nylen and reporter Steve Waldman. Its mission is to be the leading provider of inspiration, spirituality and faith-based online content in a multi-faith environment. Beliefnet has more than 14 million newsletter subscribers and averages nearly three million unique visitors per month. Beliefnet is not affiliated with any spiritual organization or movement. Beliefnet is also a successful business, which makes its money by selling the advertising space that surrounds each article on the website. There are ads for different Christian sects but also for health products and, a surprise to me, Russian Brides dot com. In 2007 Beliefnet was acquired by Fox Digital Media, a unit of Rupert Murdoch’s News Corp. The founder, Waldman, wrote, “We had a variety of motives in starting Beliefnet — personal, professional, and entrepreneurial. They all converged around a simple idea: faith is profoundly important to most Americans, and it was too often treated incompletely or condescendingly by mainstream media. We wanted to provide a safe place where people could explore their faith and find strength, hope, insight and friendship.”

Who uses Belief-O-Matic® now? What do some users do after they’ve done the quiz?

Millions of people receive Beliefnet’s newsletter, and millions visit the website each month. The gender split is roughly 50-50, and the ages range from 35 to 70. Several hundred thousand people have done the Belief-O-Matic quiz. I know from anecdotes that many people sincerely do the quiz as part of their spiritual search. Once a person has completed the quiz and received a ranking of what religions most closely map their beliefs, the website makes it easy to link to information about each religion. Many North Americans do the quiz and learn that they are 100% Unitarian Universalist. And for quite a number of them, their next step is to Google “Unitarian Universalist” and the name of their town. That’s when church websites become vital. A person who has been told that they hold beliefs similar to the Unitarians will look at a Unitarian website and check, “Does what I see on the church website reflect what I already believe?”

Religion researchers in the US and Canada know that before most people walk into a new church for the first time, they read every page of that church’s website. They may also read several of the sermon texts if those are online. A decade ago we produced brochures to hand out to newcomers, telling them what Capital UU is all about; nowadays newcomers don’t need that brochure because they already know far more about us than any brochure could tell them.

There are a few problems with Belief-O-Matic®, e.g. only one kind of Muslim, two kinds of Jew, and not enough multiple choices to cover the full range of beliefs. In its language and its results, the quiz is designed for Americans and Canadians. In a study (which I cannot find again after reading it once), American researchers learned that almost a third of members of faith groups had changed religion at least once, and that among Protestants the number rose to almost fifty percent. This means that people who were raised Baptist, for instance, may have switched to the United Church; they are still essentially Christian but they made a brave choice to leave one community and join another. So the Belief-O-Matic is not perfect but it’s free, takes only 10 minutes, is likely less biased than asking a priest or rabbi for advice on religions, and gives a person a lot to think about.

If a spiritual searcher has done the Belief-O-Matic quiz, learned that they share beliefs with Religion X, found the website of the nearest house of worship, and read everything, then they get to decide: should I walk through the doors, or simply know in my heart that I hold similar beliefs to Religion X? The quiz does not tell the newcomer if the congregation will be welcoming or nice; the quiz only tells the searcher that they share current beliefs. For a brave few, this is enough to lead them to our door on a Sunday morning. Belief-O-Matic has been their spiritual guide.

Let’s take a look at some examples that I have printed from the actual quiz. [handout]

Let’s talk about religious attachments: religion of origin or family; rebellion against family or society; religion change upon marriage; loss of faith; resumption of faith; epiphany; and conversion. What does it take to stay in the religion of your parents? What does it take to leave that religion?

What are the media portrayals of religious communities, in TV, movies and the news? Given all of that, what must it take for an unchurched person to attend a religious service for the first time?

Finale: I hope that I have encouraged you to think about spiritual searches. Next time you meet someone of any age who says they have no idea what they believe, or which religious community would suit them, tell them to take the Belief-O-Matic quiz. If the quiz tells them that they are 80 to 100 percent UU, then invite them to Capital!