

“Church Shopping: A Consumer’s Guide”

Maybe it’s true that every religion has its favorite comic strip. Evangelicals and fundamentalists like *The Family Circle* and *B.C.*, for instance. Most of us probably prefer *Doonesbury*, whose creator, Gary Trudeau, based his imaginary character the Reverend Scott Sloan on the real life figure of Scotty McLennan, his former roommate from undergraduate days at Yale who’s now an ordained Unitarian Universalist minister.

In one strip that features Reverend Sloan, the red-headed, bearded clergyman is meeting in the parish house with a middle-aged pair of church shoppers who’ve expressed interest in the brand new congregation he has founded, called *The Little Church of Walden*.

“So what would you like to know about the Little Church of Walden, folks?” the minister asks. “Don’t hold back—I know how difficult it can be to choose a church.”

“Well, what’s your basic approach here, Reverend,” asks the man with a slightly receding hairline. “It is traditional gospel?”

“In a way,” hedges the minister. “I like to describe it as 12 Step Christianity. Basically, I believe that we’re all recovering sinners. My ministry is about overcoming denial. It’s about re-commitment, about redemption. It’s all in the brochure there,” he explains.

“Wait a minute,” the woman interrupts, with a concerned look on her face. “Sinners? Redemption? Doesn’t that all imply ... guilt?”

“Well, yes,” admits the clergyman, “I do rely on the occasional disincentive to keep the flock from going astray. Guilt’s part of that.”

“I dunno,” the man says, “There’s so much negativity in the world as it is.” “That’s right,” agrees his wife. “We’re looking for a church that’s supportive, a place where we can feel good about ourselves. I’m not sure the guilt thing works for us.”

“On the other hand,” notes the husband, looking at the brochure, “you do offer racquetball.” “So did the Unitarians, honey,” replies his wife. “Let’s shop around some more.”

The title of my sermon this morning is “Church Shopping: A Consumer’s Guide.” For those of you who’ve never heard the term, church shopping arrived on the scene just a generation ago. It’s one more aspect of coming-of-age for the baby boomers. Those born between the end of World War II and the beginning of the sixties started the trend, as they began to discover a need for spiritual community, for themselves and their children. But unlike their parents, boomers felt comparatively little loyalty to the denominations they were born in. Being Christened a Catholic or baptized as a Lutheran didn’t necessarily mean they were going to remain inside the fold as lifelong adherents. Rather in religion, as in so many other things, boomers demanded options

and opportunities for self-expression. As a result, most people who are looking for a spiritual home now visit several congregations before making a commitment to join any one of them.

Some of them use the internet in their search, where one site features an online quiz. “Even if YOU don’t know what faith you are,” Belief-O-Matic™ knows,” is the promise. “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.” Actually, the test is pretty good, but there’s a warning attached. Belief-O-Matic assumes no legal liability for the fate of your eternal soul.

Now I know many of my clergy friends—religious professionals of all denominations—would deplore the idea of finding a church online as a tacky symptom of everything that’s wrong with modern society. Consumer culture seems to have invaded not only the marketplace but the temple, too. Far too many people look on membership in a church or synagogue the way they regard membership in a spa or health club. They ask how many amenities are offered, and often attend services with a “what’s in it for me?” attitude. They see affiliation with a religious community as a relationship of convenience rather mutual commitment—troubling in a time when so many human bonds that once seemed sacred, from the marriage contract to the connection between doctor and patient now seem to rest on a cash-and-carry basis. Responding to shoppers, many churches feel forced to adopt the philosophy that “the customer is always right.” Some of the fastest growing congregations, for instance, have built bowling alleys and recreation centers, gathering in multimedia studios with theater seating and restaurants and boutiques attached that cater to body as well as soul in a total entertainment experience. Most major denominations, including ours, hire high-priced publicity firms to conduct market research and test ad campaigns to sell their message to the public. Some of the slogans are pretty slick, like the bumper sticker for one church that reads, “Tough week? We’re open on Sundays!” It’s catchy, but might as well be an ad for a casino or resort hotel as for a place of worship. There is something crass about marketing and selling faith like one more lifestyle accessory. It’s a distortion of what religion is all about.

On the other hand, church shopping has a good deal to recommend it. For how else are people supposed to find a spiritual home that reflects their own beliefs and values? There are well over 200 distinct sects of Protestants in the United States and not all are alike. In addition, the yellow pages here in Chittenden County carry listings for Bahia’s, Buddhists, the Sunray Peace Village and more? God has an unlisted number, so who you gonna call? Making an informed decision about joining a church is at least as important as choosing a new washer or dryer, and looking at the different models available is just plain common sense.

Now some would call this “cafeteria religion,” which has a bad name. The idea that people should select which doctrines to accept, and which to reject, runs counter to the teaching of many traditional religions. You’re not supposed to pick and choose, because truth is not a matter for private judgment or interpretation, but rather a matter

of revealed authority. In contrast, personal choice is at the core of our faith, Unitarian Universalism, and maybe that's why I've always liked cafeterias, where I can have the mashed potatoes but don't have to eat the jello salad if I don't want it, where I can take bits and pieces of Christianity (like "love your neighbor as yourself") but don't have to accept priestly celibacy or believe in a talking snake.

And perhaps that's why Newsweek a few years back in a cover story on religion in America called Unitarian Universalism "the quintessential boomer church." We are, and always have been, a movement that appeals to church shoppers—to those who want to make intelligent decisions and choices about their spiritual commitments. So the typical UU was not born into this movement, but chose it, usually after examining and discarding several other alternatives.

Church shopping ought to be encouraged rather than discouraged, in my opinion. It's a reasonable response to the marketplace of meaning that exists in the modern world. While it has some commercial overtones, it's also an honest form of exploration and religious inquiry. But church shoppers need to be just as critical as any other consumer. They need to know how to recognize quality and not be misled by false claims or a fancy sales pitch. There should be a Consumer's Reports, or its equivalent, to help them know what to look for—and what to look out for—at 10 'o clock on Sunday morning.

If I were writing a consumer's guide for church shoppers, there would be several items on my checklist. Perhaps one ought to begin, for instance, by learning how long a particular establishment has been in business. It makes a difference, for example, to know that Unitarian Universalism has been on the American scene for well over two centuries now. It helps to realize that women and men who call themselves religious liberals have been gathering in this meetinghouse to meditate on the meaning of life since 1816, when this building was first constructed and Burlington was little more than a clearing in the forest. When you join a Unitarian Universalist society, you become part of a long and honorable tradition of dissenters and reformers, from Thomas Jefferson and Abigail Adams to Susan B. Anthony and Henry Thoreau. Of course, the age and reputation of an institution should not be the deciding factor, but it can help you avoid fly-by-night operations. If the church has a post office box but not permanent address and the clergy are trained at matchbook university, it may be a tip-off that this is not a totally credible religion.

Smart consumers will also watch out for unrealistic promises and high pressure tactics. Beware the organization that says you must belong in order to be saved or avoid damnation. Avoid those who grandiose claims or exaggerated estimates of their own healing power. By the same token, keep an eye out for the religion that promises "fast, fast, fast relief" from all your worries and problems. The truth is that religious living is a lifelong quest, not a passport to immediate gratification or perpetual bliss.

What we can and should expect from a spiritual community is encouragement to ask questions and freedom to find our own answers. We should expect to be challenged to

examine our lives in light of our ideals. We should find opportunities for listening and meditation on something larger and more lasting than ourselves. We should be encouraged to be kinder to our neighbor and more compassionate with ourselves.

Those are things we try to offer here. Unitarian Universalists affirm the different ways of being religious in our world. We believe that no one path is correct for all people. The synagogue, the mosque, the temple and the zendo all have their place. You can visit each one and find mystery and meaning in all.

But avoid the mistake of shopping till you drop. At some point, make a decision and stick with it. For religion is about being rooted in a particular place with a particular people. It means holding a common storehouse of memories and dreams. It means supporting friends through grief and pain. It means watching each other's children grow. What we want from a spiritual community is the kind of intimacy and trust that come about only through years of shared living. We want to nurture relationships that can last a lifetime.

So welcome, church shoppers. We're glad you're here, whatever your beliefs or background may be. Investigate what we have to offer. Check out our programs and ministries. Sign up for a class. Sing in the choir. Share your talents. And if this feels like the place where you belong, we invite you to come into our circle of hospitality. Whether you are a Christian or pagan, atheist or Jew, our congregation will be richer for your presence.

Reverend Gary Kowalski is the author of *Earth Day: An Alphabet Book* (Skinner House, 2009) and *Revolutionary Spirits: The Enlightened Faith of America's Founding Fathers*, published by BlueBridge in 2008. He writes a blog on how the Founders viewed issues affecting faith and public life at <http://revolutionaryspirits.blogspot.com>. His other books include *The Souls of Animals* (New World Library, 2007), *Goodbye Friend: Healing Wisdom For Anyone Who Has Ever Lost A Pet* (New World Library 2007), *Science and the Search for God* (Lantern Books, 2003) and *The Bible According To Noah: Theology As If Animals Mattered* (Lantern Books, 2001). All are available on Amazon.com or from your local bookstore.