

Belief.net: An interreligious web site

by [Mark U. Edwards](#) in the [May 16, 2001](#) issue

"Here we have a multifaith, multi-approach, multi-ideological site flourishing—at a time when we're supposed to be getting more fragmented, more contentious, more divided." So wrote Steve Waldman, editor-in-chief and cofounder of Beliefnet (www.belief.net) at the beginning of the year on the first anniversary of the site.

Waldman went on to tot up the site's accomplishments, list its most popular offerings, and identify its most "inspiring" members. Beliefnet published over 4,000 articles, started 17,000 different discussions which garnered more than 200,000 messages, launched almost 1,000 "prayer circles" and created nearly 1,000 "memorials." Waldman predicted that in the first month of its second year roughly a million people would visit the site, almost 10 million pages would be "viewed" and approximately 45,000 messages posted on its message boards.

It was unclear from the statistics whether the editors were predicting that a million different people would visit the site or that the site would experience a million hits, many from individuals making multiple visits. Ten million pages may be viewed, but I suspect that far fewer will actually be read, given what we know about the reading habits of habitual Internet surfers. But these are quibbles. Beliefnet is a big deal.

But like a lot of other Internet big deals, Beliefnet has not entirely figured out its revenue stream. It announced in April that it is laying off staff and emphasizing different income-generating products.

Though Beliefnet is a product of the interactivity and wide audience the Internet offers, the site does borrow from earlier media. Waldman was national editor of *U.S. News & World Report* before cofounding Beliefnet, so it should be no surprise that the site resembles an online magazine, offering regularly updated news about religious matters. Like a fine magazine, it boasts a stable of distinguished columnists ranging from Harvey Cox to Richard Mouw, from Rabbi Irving Greenberg to Imam Sa'dullah Khan.

Beliefnet also borrows from talk radio or online “news groups,” with their discussion “threads” that string together messages in a ramifying dialogue—or sometimes raucous debate. Alongside religious news or expert commentary, Beliefnet posts visitor opinion and reaction. Does this juxtaposition represent a fierce intellectual and religious egalitarianism? Or is it a low drama of dueling assertions, drawing people in by entertaining them? Or both? Controversial topics do seem to dominate. Of the 50 “most active” discussion groups in Beliefnet’s first year, eight dealt with homosexuality and religion, three with abortion.

Beliefnet also offers online support groups, prayer circles, advice columnists and guided meditations. I would have thought that such activities would be better done face-to-face, but Waldman explains that the “Web offers a paradox: Its anonymity often leads to intimacy. People open up, reveal things about themselves, and pose questions they’d otherwise be embarrassed to ask.” I find “anonymous intimacy” a taxing, if not paradoxical, concept. I suspect that the anonymity and psychological distance imposed by the medium itself—computer screen, typed messages, long-distance lines—leads to a safe *sense* of intimacy without any of the risk or deep reward that true intimacy provides. But the online testimonials suggest that I may be too skeptical.

In an increasingly pluralistic and individualistic America, religious identity has gradually been pried loose from ethnic and family affiliation and set free to become a matter of individual choice. Many commentators have remarked on this phenomenon, some deploring the commodification of religion, others celebrating the spread of individual freedom.

The site changes daily, but on most days the variety of American religion—the extent of the implicit choice—is matter-of-factly displayed. On one day Hinduism’s Kumbha Mela celebration—which, we were told, both Paul McCartney and Madonna wanted to attend—shared screen space on Beliefnet’s homepage with a discussion of John Ashcroft’s Pentecostalism. The morality of Catholics voting for a prochoice candidate was debated alongside an advertisement for a talk by the Dalai Lama. Perry Farrell of the band Jane’s Addiction talked about his Jewish identity. Harvey Cox reviewed “the Vatican-bashing *Constantine’s Sword*,” by James Carroll.

According to my informal survey, evangelical Christians provide the most postings, but I also spotted messages from Buddhists, Wiccans, Muslims, Jews, Baha’is and many others.

“Some people treat Beliefnet as if it’s a single-faith site,” Waldman explains, “going, for instance, into the Catholic area, reading the articles, talking to other Catholics, setting up Catholic prayer circles. Others supplement their dominant faith with information from other parts of the site. And still others have no allegiance to one approach and are genuinely sampling a bit from each platter on the buffet line.”

Beliefnet does swarm with religious variety. And while columnists and visitors with “allegiance to one approach” often attempt to separate the sheep from the goats, the site itself pens them all indiscriminately together in a wide, obviously commercial, technically sophisticated and, for me, religiously dizzying site.