

An Interreligious Interview

The Interview Process

1. Choose an interviewee. Ask yourself: What type of person do I wish to interview? An academic or a teacher? a student? a ritual or congregational leader? a convert? Will I feel more comfortable interviewing someone who is younger, or older? Does the gender of the person matter to me? All the factors mentioned in these questions also influence the interviewee's understanding of her or his religion.

If you do not personally know someone you would like to interview, you may check the phone book, church agencies such as the Catholic Church's diocesan office for ecumenical or interfaith affairs, and religious student groups at colleges and universities. In addition, the two-volume text *How to Be a Perfect Stranger: A Guide to Etiquette in Other People's Religious Ceremonies*, edited by Arthur J. Magida and Stuart M. Matlins (Woodstock, VT: SkyLight Paths Publishing, 1999), has contact information for many religions and denominations. The Internet can also be a tool for finding someone to interview, perhaps even someone from another country. You can start an Internet search by typing in the names of the religion and of the locale you are interested in.

If you choose to search out a stranger to interview, it is extremely important to be cautious. Not every religious person or organization has people's best interests at heart. Some may use manipulation to get individuals to join their church, and some may have other agendas.

Before you contact the person you have chosen to interview, check with your parents and teacher. Proceed only if they approve, and ask them to help you establish the contact and introduce yourself.

2. Ask for an interview. When you request an interview with someone, always be courteous and respectful. You are representing not only yourself but also your class and your school. Even asking for an interview is an important experience of interreligious encounter; remember, you never get a second chance to make a first impression! Be sure you are able to explain what the project is about and why you are interested in interviewing a member of the religion you have selected. Also be ready to arrange the nature, place, and time of the interview—for instance, you may want to schedule an in-person interview with a local pastor in his office at three o'clock next Thursday. If you will be contacting someone in person, over the phone, or in a real-time electronic exchange, you may want to write out what you will say, or practice with someone else, beforehand.

Give the potential interviewee only as much information about you and your project as necessary or appropriate, depending on the nature of the contact and how well you know the person. Never give out personal information to a stranger, especially over the Internet. If anyone asks you inappropriate questions, immediately terminate your contact and report that person to your parents and teacher.

3. Prepare and conduct the interview. Formulating questions ahead of time is essential to a good interview. Ask yourself what you want to learn from your interviewee. Whereas some questions may focus



on biographical information, most should be aimed at getting the interviewee to open up and share his or her faith story. Personal stories tend to make an interview rich, opening a window onto the rituals, family practices, and important faith experiences of the person.

4. Follow up after the interview. Be sure to thank the interviewee at the conclusion of your time together. Also send her or him a thank-you note or thank-you e-mail. If other people helped to set up the interview, it might be appropriate to thank them as well.

Preparation for the Interview

1. Below are several statements to help you begin the process of preparing for your interview. Complete each statement.

a. The religion I have selected is _____. I am interested in this religious tradition because . . .

b. I would like to interview someone who . . .

c. Some things I want to learn from the person I interview are . . .

2. In the remaining space or on a separate sheet of paper, write several questions you would like to ask during your interview. Then share your questions with a partner. Use your partner's feedback to help you improve or add to your interview questions.

