

CHAPTER FIVE

What Others Might Say

*“It is the duty of every cultured man or woman
to read sympathetically the scriptures of the world.
If we are to respect others’ religions as we
would have them respect our own, a friendly study
of the world’s religions is a sacred duty.”*

Mahatma Gandhi

Every day, we cross paths with people of different races, religions and ethnicities—at school, a job, the grocery store, a restaurant, the park, and elsewhere. The more educated we are about the backgrounds of those people, the more likely it is we will avoid prejudice and use our judgment.

We can educate ourselves with information obtained from resources such as publications, museums, films and computers. These resources will offer excellent answers to our questions, and will raise even more questions.

But we don’t have to stop there. We can continue

our education by adding to that list one additional and extremely valuable resource: direct communication.

When using judgment, it is important that we hear directly from people what they feel and believe. It's like reading about how to drive a car, and driving a car. We learn from books how a car works: key in the ignition; make sure it's in "park;" start the engine; shift to "drive;" accelerate and so on. The elements then come to life when we're actually in the car, driving.

It's the same with people. We can read, watch and hear as much information as possible to understand others, but it all comes to life when we actually interact. And it's a surprisingly easy thing to do. Whether we communicate in person or by telephone, email or letter, individuals and groups are usually happy to share of themselves.

I was eager to educate myself about one of the ways people differ: religion. Given that we co-exist with over six billion people in the world, and most people practice a religion, I wanted to learn more about the various faiths so I could use judgment. Recognizing that my current understanding was very limited, I sought to expand my thinking by obtaining and considering new information.

I started with a general list of all of the religions of the world, then narrowed it down to religions practiced in the United States. From there, I focused in turn on each religion's origin, history and traditions.

I read publications in the library, visited museums, and browsed on the computer. Before long, I was getting answers to my questions, and finding new questions to pursue.

Then it was time to bring it all to life. I began communicating directly with people who practiced the various religions: those who worked in my office, delivered the mail, gave me a dental check-up, served food in a restaurant, fixed my car, sat next to me on an airplane, or cut my hair. It was thrilling to see the keen interest of each person. Just the idea that someone cared about his or her religion elicited a warm, friendly and enthusiastic response.

So I went even further by reaching out to religious leaders within and outside of my own community. These were people whom I did not know and with whom I had no prior contact. I introduced myself in person or in a letter and let it be known that I would greatly appreciate an answer to this question: How does your religion view “tolerance”—a willingness to accept and include members of a group different from your own?

Again, the response was overwhelming! The authors generously took the time not only to write the essays, but also to engage in follow-up conversations with me, just because I asked.

In the pages that follow, I’ve included a sampling of those responses. These insightful essays offer thoughts from several, but not all, of the religions practiced in the United States.