

## Encounters for Change: A Book Review Roundtable

### *Summary*

*This book review essay with response from the author points to strides that are being made in interfaith and cultural conversation. Embracing humility remains a guiding value to lead us forward. There is also a need to make space for acknowledging and honoring grief. Adding the recognition of grief in our interreligious encounters would encourage talking honestly about the pain and disappointments.*

**Dagmar Grefe, *Encounters for Change: Interreligious Cooperation in the Care of Individuals and Communities* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011), 226 pp.**

REVIEW BY PETER YUICHI CLARK

When I was still a new Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE) supervisor, I supervised a year-long student of Japanese ancestry. Since I am mixed-race Japanese American, I was excited and I engaged our relationship with gusto. The student also was very eager and seemed appreciative of our time together, and at the end of the autumn unit he testified to his peers that he had learned a lot about offering spiritual care from me. Yet, with a visible summoning of courage, he also said that my style of interaction had confused him and that he felt some dissatisfaction about my ability to connect with him. I felt saddened by his feedback and a little confused myself. Where had I gone wrong?

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Dagmar Grefe, PhD, is clinical assistant professor of pediatrics at the Keck School of Medicine, University of Southern California and manager of the Department of Spiritual Care and Clinical Pastoral Education at Children's Hospital Los Angeles, 4650 Sunset Blvd., Mailstop 80, Los Angeles, CA 90027 (Email: dgrefe@chla.usc.edu).

Rabbi Susan Freeman, MA, is chaplain and CPE supervisor at VITAS Innovative Hospice Care, 9655 Granite Ridge Dr., Suite 300, San Diego, CA 92123-2676 (Email: susan.freeman-graubart@vitas.com).

Peter Yuichi Clark, PhD, is professor of pastoral care at the American Baptist Seminary of the West in Berkeley, CA, and manager of spiritual care services at UCSF Medical Center and UCSF Benioff Children's Hospital, 505 Parnassus Ave., San Francisco, CA 94143-0208 (Email: peter.clark@ucsfmedctr.org).

Grefe, Freeman, and Clark are certified ACPE supervisors.

*Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry*

ISSN 2325-2855

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We continued to work together and we built a more helpful supervisory alliance over the remainder of that year. Both the student and I learned enormously from that experience, and I am grateful that he was able to tell me what he felt and that I was able to hear him and adjust my supervisory interventions appropriately. As I ponder that incident, with hindsight as my ally, I realize that I over-estimated my awareness of, and sensitivity to, the religious and cultural dynamics in which this student, a Buddhist, was embedded. Further, I was susceptible to xenophilia, a form of over-identification or attachment to what feels foreign or unknown—in my case, to the Japanese culture in which I have had too little direct immersion.

I tell this tale because it illustrates the pressing need for a book such as Dagmar Grefe's *Encounters for Change*. With dexterity and compassion, my friend and colleague guides readers through the complex web of issues that can arise within interreligious exchanges in a variety of contexts: congregational and community settings, situations of crisis where direct spiritual care is needed, and CPE supervision.

Grefe presents a two-pronged argument on interreligious encounter. The first premise is simple yet vital to grasp: When people of different religious traditions interact with one another (as they have over the centuries, and do so now with increased frequency and at an accelerated pace), they meet in all their complexity, including their beliefs, histories, perceptions of the other, fears, and cultural heritage; and a genuine relationship will attend to these various dimensions. The second premise is based upon her reading of social identity theory, which contends that "change of group conflict begins with a change of perception, followed by change of our emotions and our behavior toward others" (p. 25). Grefe concurs with this progression, yet she asserts that change can happen in the opposite direction as well: as people take the risk to act cooperatively, their feelings and perceptions will follow. To call upon American cinema for a rephrasing: "Act as if ye had faith...and faith will be given to you."<sup>1</sup>

To make her case, Grefe begins by examining "what keeps us apart" and the human phenomenon of categorization, which allows us to organize our perceptions yet can introduce unconscious evaluations and can trigger feelings, particularly fear. She distinguishes between stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination as forms of bias and she notes: "The more important our membership in a particular group is for our sense of self and identity, the more we tend to experience other groups as a challenge and even a threat" (p. 46). I appreciate her efforts to normalize human thought, feeling, and action, even when these exemplify less-than-flattering aspects of ourselves.

If we want to resolve interreligious conflicts based upon biased attitudes, values, and assumptions, Grefe maintains that we must address the convictions taught in our respective faiths *and* the relational dynamics that arise between us—a task that entails nothing less than a “change of mind, change of heart, and change of practice” (p. 87). Toward that end Grefe enlists the psychologist Gordon Allport, who proposes that prejudice can be reduced when majority and minority groups enter a situation with relatively equal status, pursuing common goals, and with institutional support; and as they interact they develop cooperation and the potential for friendships. She also discusses four paths or strategies that can nurture these intergroup contact conditions: cross-categorization (identifying our overlapping group memberships), de-categorization (a personalized recognition of the other—“I knew you as a Muslim man; now you are Abdul”), differentiation (acknowledging both the similarities and differences between my group and the other), and re-categorization (moving from “us” and “them” toward “we”). When we can exercise personalization and empathy while maintaining mutual differentiation, we can reach across religious boundaries in significant and life-giving ways, a possibility that Grefe illustrates through interviews with religious leaders in the Los Angeles area.

Given the focus of this journal and my own predilections, I was most drawn to chapters 6 and 7 of Grefe’s book, in which she addresses interreligious aspects of spiritual care and clinical pastoral supervision respectively. In regard to the former, Grefe draws the distinctions between interdenominational, intercultural, and interreligious spiritual care; and she utilizes interreligious prayer as a prism for advancing the dialogue. Along the way Grefe makes two contributions to our understanding. First, she adds *connecting*—“linking persons to their particular spiritual resources, to their spiritual practices and communities” (p. 134)—to the familiar taxonomy of four pastoral functions first listed by Clebsch and Jaekle (*healing, sustaining, guiding, reconciling*) and later augmented by Howard Clinebell (*nurturing*) and by Kathleen Billman (*conspiring* and *collaborating*) and then Emmanuel Lartey (*liberating* and *empowering*). I believe that her addition provides further nuance to an already helpful paradigm in the field. Second, drawing from the work of S. Wesley Ariarajah (as well as Derald Wing Sue and David Sue, it appears), Grefe proposes three concentric circles of interreligious spiritual care and three corresponding roles for the caregiver to embody. In the ring of common human experience, the caregiver serves as a *companion*; in the ring of interconnected spiritual practice, the caregiver is a *representative of the sacred*; and

in the ring of particular spiritual practice, the caregiver functions as a *connecting resource agent*. Grefe's articulation of these roles is quite illuminating; I already have employed them with my students as they and I reflect together on how they have addressed the spiritual needs of a diverse patient population.

In exploring how interreligious issues affect supervision, Grefe invites the voices of Zen Buddhists, Jews, Muslims, and a Native American member of the Osage Nation to underscore some of the cultural challenges inherent in CPE students' learning experience. (Grefe also practices her own intercultural outreach by writing this book in English and publishing it in the United States—she is a native of Germany.) With their perspectives to inform readers of the necessity and potentials for interreligious clinical supervision, she moves to concentrate on three dimensions: the supervisory relationship, group supervision, and curricular resources. While all three merit attention, I found Grefe's analysis of the first two dimensions to be most engaging and beneficial. For example, in discussing supervisory relationships, she invites supervisors to attend to their potential blind spots—such as the privileging of cultural norms of “instant intimacy” and “confrontation” in many CPE programs. She also highlights Eberhard Hauschildt's description of typical emotional responses to people who are culturally different (i.e., ambivalence, xenophobia, or xenophilia) as common elements of supervisory countertransference. She encourages her supervisory colleagues and herself to engage in intentional self-disclosure to expand our understandings of spiritual care and counseling by learning from other faiths, to make room for and reflect upon the four paths of intergroup contact within group supervision, and to seek regular consultation. Her discussion of these insights, and numerous others within this chapter, is worth the price of the book in my opinion.

Grefe's penultimate chapter provides readers with a theological lens on the validity of interreligious encounters, grounded in her beliefs that religion does not equal God; that a sincere Christian commitment leads us toward the religiously other; and that we are social animals. “The best approach to our own faith and the faith of our neighbor,” she writes, “is a stance of realistic humility” (p. 191). This is a stance that Grefe reinforces in her concluding chapter: “Speaking from the context of my own Christian faith, cooperating with persons across religious traditions in the work of healing is a spiritual practice rooted in core Christian beliefs. Collaborative action provides modest goals, entry points, and a low threshold where participants do not feel threatened in their religious identity. Cooperation starts with a common ground but does not intend to dissolve differences. As we

work together and get to know each other, we are changed in the process. Interfaith cooperation involves head, heart, and hands" (p. 201).

Throughout the book Grefe is quick to recount anecdotes of her own struggles and successes and she offers insightful counsel with the same gentleness and respect that she hopes to enhance in her audience. While Grefe's book is by no means the final word, it is certainly a clarion call—a much-needed and wise word for these times. It rewards careful and deliberate reading and thus I highly recommend it for everyone who is invested in formation and supervision of spiritual caregivers.

#### RESPONSE BY SUSAN FREEMAN

I appreciate Peter Yuichi Clark's thorough and eloquent review of Dagmar Grefe's book. In accepting the invitation to this "round table" conversation, I offer some thoughts and feelings from my perspective as a Rabbi and CPE supervisor.

My dominant feelings around my work with a diverse body of students are joy and gratification. I have the privilege of meeting and learning from, learning with, and teaching individuals from a multitude of nations, religions, and ethnicities. It is invigorating and overall happily challenging work!

That said, in considering my comments for this piece, I observed that my first thoughts to emerge were a review of my own painful experiences navigating the interfaith world. I say "interfaith," but in my years as a CPE student and supervisor, the sensitivities predominantly have straddled Judaism, my own religion, and Christianity in its various denominations and expressions. So, though my overriding day-to-day experience of working with a diverse body of students is joy and gratification, why did I gravitate to re-imagining painful episodes and encounters? I recap one of these in the following paragraphs.

When I was in my first unit as a supervisory education student, my role was to be an observer, sitting outside the circle of students. Early in the unit, students shared a synopsis of their theological orientation. One student, an Assemblies of God minister, included in his sharing points laid out in his denomination's creed, including:

5. The Salvation of Man: "Man's only hope of redemption is through the shed blood of Jesus Christ the Son of God."
15. The Final Judgment: "There will be a final judgment in which the wicked dead will be raised and judged according to their works. Whosoever is not found written in the Book of Life, together with the devil and his angels, the

beast and the false prophet, will be consigned to everlasting punishment in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone, which is the second death" (Matthew 25:46; Mark 9:43-48; Revelation 19:20; 20:11-15; 21:8).

In the group processing which followed there was no discussion of these passages and their effect, including no comment by the co-supervisors of the group. Being in an observer role, I was to remain silent. There is more to the story and eventually there was helpful and healing processing between myself and the group. Still, my point in bringing forth this vignette is that I am not convinced of these premises Grefe presents: "The development of a common group identity does not require that members give up their former less inclusive membership" (p. 82). "Persons can hold dual identities simultaneously, and social cohesion does not require that individuals deny their particular cultural identity" (p. 82).

I concur with Grefe that across religions and cultures there can be common, valued experiences; worthy collaborative projects; meaningful areas of shared interests and identities; and friendships. However, I have seen Christian students wrestle with being able to maintain the integrity of foundational beliefs while authentically serving those outside their faith. How meaningful is "common group identity" when one member of the group (or partner in a pastoral visit) believes, or aligns him/herself with a faith system in which the non-Christians in the group will burn in hell for eternity?

Earlier in the book, Grefe quotes a conversation involving a Muslim and non-Muslim: "Sadika, you are not wearing a head-scarf. I thought Muslim women are supposed to wear one" (p. 78). Clearly, presumptions about others burning in hell for eternity and values around wearing head scarves are qualitatively dissimilar. When there is a group member who purports belief such as did the student mentioned above, the intensity of such exclusive and condemnatory stances can contribute to a continual undertone of alienation and woundedness in relationships across faiths. In any case, that is my experience as a Jew—when I know someone believes as did this student, a resonance of distrust and anxiety will always be there for me. While many Christians may not claim affinity with the Assemblies of God minister's creed, it is grounded in New Testament texts. I have not come across a mainline Christian creed that explicitly rejects the exclusiveness reflected in the creed.

I understand intimations of superiority are not exclusive to one tradition. I appreciate Grefe's affirmation of the importance of humility, as well as Clark lifting up that value in his review. I concur with Rabbi Mark Diamond of Los Angeles, who is quoted by Grefe: "Each of our faith traditions

has passages that speak of peace and love and so on, but we also have passages that are blemished and set us apart; we need to wrestle with these problematic texts. We have to deal with what's troubling in our own tradition and gives offense to other traditions" (p. 115). Even as I agree with Rabbi Diamond, I note Grefe's sensitivity in raising the following: "The history of Christian imperialism and anti-Judaism present a special obligation for Christians to rethink our relationship to other faiths" (p. 186). I am intrigued by Grefe's explanation of comparative theology as "committed to the Christian tradition *and* open to the truth that may lie beyond our particular understanding" (p. 185). Most of the Christian students and colleagues I have encountered in my CPE world of the last ten years would reflect that stance.

Still, I am acutely aware of the paradoxical nature of this stance. It is one that many of my Christian students and colleagues struggle with. I also struggle with dimensions of my own Jewish tradition—but salvation is not one of them. I whole-heartedly believe that any individual who leads a good life has access to eternal salvation—assuming there is such a thing—as surely as I have. Also, I believe that one can lead a good life in following the dictates of Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, among other faiths, or no faith. There is nothing in my faith that holds me back from making such a pronouncement about universalistic access to salvation. I experience no paradox.

I am committed to my relationships across faiths and deeply value the many close friendships and alliances I have developed. At the same time, in my role as hospice chaplain, I often teach and reflect on grief. Grief does not make it into Grefe's book as an element impacting interfaith relationships. I felt grief in the vignette I described above. I felt grief when I attended the ordination of my student at his United Church of Christ community. Mentoring and supervising this student over the course of two years, I felt an especial closeness with him. My heart dropped when I heard these words from the day's scriptural reading and sermon inspiration: "On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews..." (John 20:19). I've felt grief many other times as well in my interfaith encounters.

I wonder to what degree Christians feel grief toward the Jews—that we know about Jesus and yet have chosen not to accept him as our savior. The inference could be made that Jews do not see the Christian God as a true God. Otherwise, we would be Christians as well. For some Christians there may be grief that individuals of other faiths, whom they have come to care deeply about, will not be saved.



For all the reasons Grefe outlines in her book, the tools she provides us, and that Clark highlights in his review, I believe there is great hope for “encounters for change.” I affirm the celebration of the strides that are being made in interfaith and cultural conversations and am hopeful for the future. I agree in the importance of embracing humility as a guiding value to lead us forward, but I feel we need to make space for acknowledging and honoring grief, too. Grief theorists often advise that the only way to move beyond grief is to engage it, to process it, to give it its due. Leaning into the grief between us, talking honestly about the pain and disappointments, is a dimension I would add to the conversation.

#### RESPONSE BY THE AUTHOR, DAGMAR GREFE

I am grateful to my friends and colleagues Peter Yuichi Clark and Susan Freeman for engaging my book and presenting their reflections. I appreciate Clark’s thorough and sensitive review of my publication as well as his insightful description of his self-supervision working with a student of Japanese ancestry. A book about interreligious relations is best discussed in dialogue, and I value Clark’s initiative in inviting responses from interfaith partners in supervision.

Freeman shares two vignettes from her supervision as a Rabbi working with students from Christian traditions. I appreciate the honesty with which she talks, not only about gratifying but also painful experiences.

My response focuses on three topics. First, in light of Freeman’s first vignette, I clarify the concept of “common group identity.” Second, I lift up her suggestion that interfaith work include grief work. Third, I call attention to the history of the relationships between different religious groups.

Freeman wonders if the concept of a “common group identity” makes sense when a group member aligns him- or herself with an exclusive and even condemnatory view of persons of other faiths. Does my claim really hold, that members in a diverse small group do not have to give up their less inclusive, meaning their particular, group identity for the sake of a common group identity? Her questions compel me to clarify the concept of “common group identity,” which describes one of several phases of group development outlined in the literature of intergroup relations theory. This theory describes how bias and prejudice can be reduced when persons, who are members of different social groups, encounter each other in small intergroup contact groups.



“Common group identity” describes a late development in small intergroup contact groups and cannot be properly understood without the two phases that precede it. During the first phase of de-categorization and cross-categorization, members of different out-groups have a chance to get to know each other as persons and discover commonalities (“I knew you as a Muslim. Now you are Abdul”). As human beings we have a tendency to ignore, as long as possible, information that challenges our established assumptions. Therefore, it is important that members in diverse groups not only discover their commonalities, but also their differences; that they not only develop personalized, but also differentiated perceptions of the “other.” This phase is described as mutual differentiation (“In some ways we are alike, in some ways we are different”). Because majority cultures are seen as normative in larger society (Caucasian and Christian in contemporary CPE, for example); particular identities, especially those of minority groups, need to be expressed so their distinctiveness is maintained and not assimilated (pp. 83; 149–152). The last phase of group development, the “common group identity,” is not a group where members share similar views and values, but is a working group where differences and conflicts are discussed and valued (“We work together now”).

What might supervision look like that applies intergroup relations theory in a situation when a student, let’s call him Joe, maintains the Christian faith as the only valid path to salvation? The small group presents a chance for Joe to relate to Susan, who represents the “other”—a real person who according to his theology follows a religious path lesser than his own. Mutual differentiation means that group members’ particular identities surface. If this does not happen spontaneously, a supervisor should invite Susan and others to express their own views and how they (and possibly patients from diverse traditions) are impacted by each other’s beliefs. Hopefully, Joe can put a face on those who are condemned according to his theology. There is no guarantee, but as studies have demonstrated, there is some promise that such a group experience may challenge Joe’s exclusive assumptions and engage the group in deeper exploration of their beliefs and values. Since CPE is not intergroup contact *per se*, but education for professional ministry, Joe will have to demonstrate during the course of the unit how he, as chaplain, can respectfully work with patients and colleagues of other faiths. At the same time, a supervisor needs to monitor the level of safety in the group. Freeman underscores that “...as a Jew—when I know that someone believes as this student does, a resonance of distrust and anxiety will always be there

for me." Basic trust in a "common group identity" can only be established when feelings of anxiety and hurt can surface and are received with respect.

In sum, my approach is misunderstood if cooperation were to be achieved by suppressing injury, anger, or conflict and thus keeping relationships at a superficial level. In my book I provide tools for conflict management (pp. 65ff., 163–168). Yet, the range of emotions that are part of intergroup situations need to be explored more fully. Intergroup relations theorists have acknowledged that the theory is heavily focused on cognitive processes such as categorization and stereotyping. More research is needed in exploring the role of emotions (p. 90). In my book I primarily address the emotions of empathy and anxiety (pp. 89–97). Freeman points out that grief is another powerful emotional process that needs attention.

Freeman's vignettes and her reflections on grief underscore, in my view, how the history of different religious groups influences our mutual relationships today. A common heritage and a process of painful separation shape the history of Jewish-Christian relations. Theological concepts of supremacy and anti-Judaist passages in our scriptures have led to a rejection of the Jewish people and contributed to intolerable violence. When a student expresses exclusive views in a CPE group today, the weight of this painful history is present. As a supervisor I would want to raise this history and how it impacts our relations today. Freeman lifts up fundamentalism and "comparative theology," two of a range of Christian theological approaches to religious pluralism that I introduce in the last chapter of my book. Some of these have developed in the process of grief work: facing the history of anti-Judaism and Christian imperialism and seeking to articulate and practice a Christian theological vision that is an alternative to bigotry and supremacy (pp. xviii, 186, 193).

I value that Freeman adds the dimension of grief to interreligious work. She encourages us to "lean into the grief between us." Grief work, I believe, includes that we "lean into our history," another aspect in the development of authentic interreligious relationships.

#### NOTE

1. This quotation is not mentioned in Grefe's book. It derives from *The Verdict*, a film based on Barry Reed's novel of the same name, scripted by David Mamet, and directed by Sidney Lumet (Los Angeles: 20th Century-Fox, 1982), in which attorney Frank Galvin (Paul Newman) cites this aphorism during his summation and attributes it to his Catholic upbringing. I have been unable to locate the origin of this statement to a source beyond the imaginations of Reed, Mamet, and Lumet.