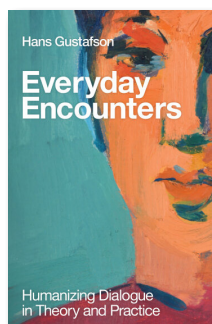


BOOK REVIEW

Everyday Encounters: Humanizing Dialogue in Theory and Practice

By Hans Gustafson. Fortress Press, 2025. ix + 189 pp. ISBN: 9798889832393. \$30.00 (paperback); \$27.99 (e-book).



Hans Gustafson's pocket paperback begins with a disclaimer, with the author conveying that dialogue is not an area of his practice or strength. Rather, the book began as a chapter in another of the interreligious scholar's projects during the pandemic and US racial reckoning, then grew into a book in its own right. These origins are important to frame what follows as an introduction to dialogue in theory and practice from a perspective of humility, though the author is, of course, the esteemed Director of the Jay Phillips Center for Interreligious Studies at the University of St. Thomas. *Everyday Encounters* marries breadth of exposure to perspectives on dialogue with concision and readability in Gustafson's synthesis and articulation of the aims and methods of dialogue. In doing so, he draws on sources from key dialogue centers, multiple religious and nonreligious traditions, and from Global North and South scholarship.

Organizing the *what*, *why*, and *how* of dialogue into a succinct five chapter guide, Gustafson outlines the sometimes contradictory aims parties can bring to multiple kinds of dialogue, including religious, then explores the nature of dialogue and how it is distinguished from other forms of communication. Additional chapters cover generally agreed-upon ground rules and maxims to “create environments conducive to constructive human connection” (130). The chapter on maxims draws from Patricia Ryan Madson's work in the world of dramatic improvisation before Gustafson closes philosophically on the implications of dialogue. The book's structure, flowing from descriptions of dialogue and its goals to its methods and promising practices, follows a logical sequence for this short intro to the topic. While the inclusion of quips from the world of improv was surprising, it corresponds to the author's desire to humanize the subject. However,

anecdotes with situational guidance from practitioners may have served a more directly relevant function.

As a quick read and pocket guide for the reader first engaging in dialogue or incorporating its practices into everyday encounters with difference, the book lives up to its namesake. By not intending a comprehensive overview of theory or approaches, but a more pragmatic introduction, the author achieved the twin aims of accessibility and utility for a lay reader: *Everyday Encounters* orients the reader to the topic while offering selective footnotes for further exploration. While the book provides an overview of key perspectives and a sampling of methods for the reader to consider alongside their own preferences for dialogue, it is neither positioned nor functions as a systematic review of dialogue theory or practice.

Regarding readership and usage, the book is a helpful tool for those who work in dialogue spaces and desire to provide context for encounters, such as raising the possibility of disparate aims. An included chart that distinguishes dialogue from debate is particularly useful as a preface to dialogue in academic settings. One can imagine the first few chapters appearing on undergraduate syllabi for interreligious and civic engagement courses and suggested as pre-reading for dialogue-oriented events. The practicality of the work makes it likely to be picked up by early career chaplains and interreligious workers while also appealing to a general reader who wishes to increase their awareness of and openness to encounter in everyday life. In this sense, the book very much lives up to its promise. It is a good beginning point for those considering how to approach dialogue together and to surface potential differences in presumed goals and methods, so that these may be discussed and agreed upon in advance.

Along with the benefits this book offers practitioners and the public, there were some missed opportunities. I wished the author would have given more space to the dynamics that can occur in dialogic encounters, both positive and negative, and what can be done to redirect, reframe, or open new possibilities. This would have increased the volume's appeal. Specifically, one common goal of dialogue that the book points to repeatedly is to humanize the other in the service of authentic human connection. Gustafson invokes the mantra, "humanize, humanize, humanize" (80) but falls somewhat short of the subtitle goal to humanize dialogue in theory and practice by not including reference to socially just or decolonizing dialogic practices that lead to greater humanization. The book elevates encounter as a tool for peace but does not speak to the cultural or structural violence inherent in the local or diasporic socioreligious contexts where dialogue takes place. The author recognizes the ubiquity of power dynamics but

focuses on human interconnectedness and each participant's responsibility to seek equality in encounter rather than their responsibility to acknowledge inequality experienced by the other in society as part of a commitment to authentic encounter.

Another missed opportunity was the lack of question prompts at the end of individual chapters or in an appendix, which could be used in a course, multi-day dialogue event, or with a potential dialogue partner. Given the work's brevity, a list of prompts and resources for training or further reading would have been appropriate to include at the end.

Gustafson's book meets the layperson curious to know more about the *what, why, and how* of dialogue to build their understanding of and capacity for skillful everyday encounters. The established dialogue practitioner familiar with the perspectives, centers, and voices referenced is not the intended audience for this book. Instead, the book is a welcome addition as a readable introduction for members of the public curious about dialogue. Practitioners may find it useful in training students and facilitators, complementary to in-house trainings in postures and protocols. There is the possible downside that a brief introduction to dialogue, absent an opportunity to practice and receive feedback, could leave readers feeling overconfident in their knowledge or skill. The author's tone, positionality, and humility mitigate this, as do his pointing to the importance of personal disposition, self-awareness, and empathy along with the need for a lack of self-interest in the outcomes of dialogue. Gustafson's *Everyday Encounters* strikes a delicate balance between appreciation for right motivations, knowledge, and interpersonal skill in this brief introduction to the theory and practice of dialogue.

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