



# Book Review

James M. Skelly, *The Sarcophagus of Identity: Tribalism, Nationalism, and the Transcendence of the Self*. Ibidem Press, Stuttgart, 2017. <https://cup.columbia.edu/book/the-sarcophagus-of-identity/978383821038>

Reviewed by David Lotto

James Skelly, is a sociologist, peace activist, educator, scholar, ethicist, and long time member of the Wellfleet psychohistory group started by Erik Erickson and Robert Lifton in 1966.

The book he has written is an exploration of identity, both as a personal account of the author's journey through his evolving identity, and a rich and scholarly meditation on certain aspects of identity, particularly the destructive consequences that can and have followed from the politics of identity—chiefly, the many forms of violence inflicted on people in the name of some large group identity.

Several psychohistorians, most notably Vamik Volkan, for example in his book *Killing in the Name of Identity*, have addressed the issue of the psychological motives and structures that are implicated in the violence and destruction of war, genocide, and ethnic cleansing.

As its title implies, Skelly sees identity as something that can be constricting and limiting, often imposed from the outside. In his words:

The basic thesis of this monograph is that having an 'identity' appears to solve the most fundamental existential problem—*who* we are, and to an extent, the corollary problem of *why* we are on this planet. But the consequence of this impoverished 'solution' is that we not only kill in the name of identity, but that we are imprisoned within the identity from the moment of birth by others far more powerful, until we at least tacitly agree to become our own jail keepers while besotted with the illusion of our freedom. (p. 25-26)