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MANIFEST
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Gaslighting **for GOD**

A SATIRICAL GUIDE TO
SAVE YOURSELF
from **SPIRITUAL**
NARCISSISTS

CHOOSE
Joy

BLESS
Your Heart

BECKY GARRISON

Gaslighting for God

A Satirical Guide to Save Yourself
from Spiritual Narcissists

Becky Garrison

Lake Drive Books
6757 Cascade Road SE, #162
Grand Rapids, MI 49546
info@lakedrivebooks.com
lakedrivebooks.com
@lakedrivebooks
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This book includes personal stories. It reflects the author's present recollections of experiences and information gathered over time. Some names and characteristics have been changed, some events have been compressed, and some dialogue has been re-created.

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Warning:

*This book contains depictions of extreme spiritual narcissism
that may be disturbing to critical thinkers.
Reader discretion is advised.*

Any information in this book represents either an opinion expressed by the author or has been obtained from sources believed to be reliable. Hence, the reader should not consider the information in this book to constitute legal or therapeutic advice. Seek counsel from trained professionals when addressing spiritual abuse and religious trauma, and please vet with care those you entrust with your stories. Your soul and sanity will thank you.

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Introduction: Spiritual Narcissists Among Us

In 1994, I thought I had found my calling as a religious satirist when I sold my first article to *The Wittenburg Door*, at the time the world's largest, oldest, and only Christian satire magazine. After rising to the rank of senior contributing editor, *The Door* slammed in my face when it closed shop in 2008.

By the time I moved to the Pacific Northwest six years later, I had stopped calling myself a professional Christian. The Christian media industry (nicknamed the “Christian Industrial Complex” by author Warren Cole Smith, among others)¹ had imploded under the weight of its unholy hubris. Believers were fleeing from institutional churches like rats from a sinking ship, myself included. With limited employment opportunities in the Bible biz, I said to myself, “I’m done satirizing this God game.” I could see the writing on the wall: the institutional church was going under, Titanic-style, with no lifeboats in sight.

Cutting-edge ventures aimed at rebranding the church as “cool” used to draw in those disenchanted with traditional forms of institutional church, but these methods no longer appealed to twenty-first-century pious peeps. The liberal mainline Episcopal Church of my youth that once marched in solidarity with Martin Luther King, Jr., was now walking biblically bowlegged, so to speak (sans a few prophetic outliers like Manhattan-based St. Mark’s Church-in-the-Bowery).

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Conversely, conservative forms of religion, appealing to many, were appalling to many more, many of whom said they were “done” with religion and went on to live entirely secular lives. Once these people stop checking off the correct Christian category, the institutional church drops them from their membership list as though they committed a serious spiritual sin. Some religion writers call these secular people “nones” because that’s what they put on the census forms under “religion.”

In my reporting on American Christianity, I observed how these “nones” and “dones” felt free to choose a path that spoke to them, one without guilt-ridden dogmas. Some find occasional comfort in a church, synagogue, temple, or mosque that truly welcomes all, one that aims to be a place of healing, not a means of harm to others. Others choose to worship, reflect, or meditate outside of traditional religious structures. Simultaneously, for the first time in U.S. history, atheists began to come out of the closet in droves.²

I had to wonder why more and more people were distancing themselves from religious institutions. Soon enough, through my ongoing connections with trauma experts and survivors of spiritual abuse, I became increasingly aware of how spiritual narcissists have dominated the American Christian culture I had been satirizing since I penned my first piece for *The Wittenburg Door* back in 1994. Even though I could now see some patterns emerging that helped explain this dynamic, I had no viable outlets where I could place these stories other than the infrequent piece for *Spirituality & Health*. I now had the tools I needed to make at least some sense of this mis-sional madness, but it seemed no one else was interested.

However, when I got word in 2021 that *The Door* was reopening in an online format, I agreed to serve on the Board of Directors, hoping this development was more than just a blessed blip. Then, in 2022, I began writing for the humanist online platform *Only Sky*.

Here I focused on covering sex, including #churchtoo abuses, and drugs (cannabis and psychedelics) for their Taboo section. But within a year the site went dark due to a lack of funding. I had to assume my second life as a religious satirist was just a fad and not the start of something bigger.

And then—surprise!—*Only Sky* reemerged in a restructured format in conjunction with a burgeoning interest by other outlets in works reporting on #metoo abuses within supposedly sacred settings. Concurrently, a #churchtoo tsunami invaded the shores of my social media feeds. All these developments told me that perhaps, just maybe, I needed to dip my toe back into this God game.

So here I am, back and barefoot.

This time I'm returning as an outsider without the label of "Christian author," though even during my twenty-five-year stint as a religious satirist, I was never Bible-blessed enough to morph into a *New York Times* bestselling, branded Christian celebrity. Seems I've been on the outs from the get-go.

nakedpastor



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With *Gaslighting for God: A Satirical Guide to Save Yourself from Spiritual Narcissists*, I shift from satirizing those Christian leaders who put profit over prophecy to viewing these charismatic charlatans through the lens of spiritual narcissism. The title of this book stems from the blowback I get whenever I call someone's not-so-sacred sh*t on the carpet. For as long as I can remember, my B.S. detector has a propensity to go into overdrive whenever I encounter an individual or institution that gives me a case of the unholy heebie

jeebies. Even when I can't quite identify the specific reasons why I'm getting these somatic sensations, I've learned over the years to trust my gut when something feels amiss.³

This inner intuition, coupled with the intense desire to speak truth to pastoral power that I inherited from my twelfth-great-grandfather Roger Williams (a seventeenth-century religious freedom pioneer), led me to become a religious satirist. The same instincts also informed me when it was time to leave the institutional church and become a traveling pilgrim just like my ancestor. In this journey I went from calling myself a pre-natal Episcopalian (do the ecclesiology and the science), courtesy of my late Episcopal priest/sociology professor father, to describing myself as an apophatic agnostic Anglican.

I can still trace what the Celts called the thin line separating this world from the next as I embrace both the Cloud of the Unknowing and my Anglican heritage—but I'll break out in unholy hives if I'm forced to sit on a hard wooden pew surrounded by even more hardened, knotty souls. I'm more liable to encounter the divine while kayaking or fly-fishing down a river, camping surrounded by the Douglas Firs that serve as my cathedral, walking along the Pacific Northwest's ragged coastline, getting lost in a spirit-filled festival, or celebrating with my _____ chosen community at my local cidery, brewpub, or tasting room. _____

Every day people are straying away from the church and going back to God.
—Lenny Bruce⁴

Yet my B.S. detector kept going off whenever I was in the presence of “enlightened” energies such as tantra pujas, ecstatic dances, and mindfulness meditation circles—especially those with a bastardized Buddhist bent. Why was I so drawn to these supposedly welcoming and inclusive spiritual settings that brought me to a state of bliss but also kept triggering me?

My search for answers to this question began after I connected with a licensed (supposedly trauma-informed) therapist at these happenings and our professional and personal relationship imploded in 2016.⁵ Thanks to a narcissistic abuse support group I joined shortly thereafter, I realized this person possessed personality traits found among those who possessed extreme narcissistic traits. Whenever I found myself surrounded by narcissistic energies, my mind might have believed that I should depart from this setting, but my body didn't behave. So I stayed. Gradually I developed the self-awareness and ability needed to keep my triggers under control. Yet I still felt an overwhelming anxiety hiding behind my Southern smile whenever I was in a narcissism-riddled scenario that didn't sit well with my soul. In my attempts to keep my anxiety at bay, I would talk through my discomfort, a dynamic that too often made people think I was self-centered by hogging the conversation when I was feeling self-conscious instead.

Finally, I found healing from my childhood traumas via somatic therapies on the advice of another allegedly trauma-informed therapist I met during my reporting on the Portland sex-positive community. Surprise, surprise, this therapist proved to be cut from the same narcissistic cloth. But something told me that despite meeting two therapists who did not practice what they preached, I needed to find a way to fully release my traumas from my past and stop carrying this leftover luggage with me into the future.

Unpacking My Trauma Baggage

When I began to unload my sacramental suitcase, I found myself struck with a sudden case of devotional diarrhea. Why in god or goddess's name did I ever hang on to these theological trinkets

thinking they were all golden and good? Even if I chuck this ungodly garbage, how do I get rid of this sacrosanct stench that won't go away no matter how many times I cleanse myself? Is it possible for me to take a more breathable and believable backpack with me in my spiritual journey?

In my attempts to answer these questions, I've become acquainted with the latest research in narcissism and trauma. Also, I've explored somatic modalities used to help heal those impacted by abuses inflicted by spiritual leaders possessing extreme narcissistic tendencies. This work has greatly informed my writing as a religious satirist as it allows me to understand why some self-anointed spiritual masters both woo and wound others.

Key to this interplay is the concept of "charisma." We tend to think of certain people as having a charismatic magnetism that draws people to them. But this appears to be a chicken-or-the-egg dilemma. Are certain people innately imbued with a particular appeal? Or as sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) argued that charisma is not a quality of a person but an attribute (of 'power') that is bestowed on someone by others.⁶ Given the extremely limited work I can find exploring the dynamics of those who possess charisma and also score high on the narcissism scale, more research needs to be done in this regard.

As I delved into the growing mound of resources about #church-too and other forms of spiritual abuse, I noticed a particular pattern starting to emerge: survivor stories give hope to others suffering from missional mistreatment by letting them know they are not alone and that recovery is possible. These books can be highly instructive, provided the author has recovered enough from their traumas so that they can tell their tale without inflicting further pain on themselves and others. If not, they tend to come off as wounded *unhealers*, to put it kindly.

Yes, when re-reading some of my earlier musings on religion in America, I can see how I too came off as a bit Christian cray-cray. Even though I don't have a diagnosed mental illness, my over-the-top anxiety would spring up whenever I found myself in spiritual situations filled with narcissistic energies. Such spaces re-triggered my childhood traumas caused by growing up in an extended family that loved their liquor with some of them also loving their Lord.

Thanks to the growing awareness around #churchtoo abuses, an increasing number of people know something is amiss at their given place of worship. But until recently, they couldn't identify the dynamics behind their discomfort. Once survivors develop the awareness that their seemingly enlightened experiences were abusive, not angelic, books on religious trauma can help give them the tools they need to begin healing from toxic religious settings. The discernment gleaned from such reading will prove to be vital as they sift through the plethora of resources promoting "spiritual healing." In my reporting on wellness and sacred sexuality spaces, I've seen ample signs of woo-woo weirdness, uncredentialed crud, and even licensed clinical therapists who weaponize their training in pursuit of their own desires over addressing the needs of those under their care. Fortunately, there is a growing mound of books penned by credible sources who have been tackling the latest research into religious trauma, and they have begun to publish constructive content.

However, I don't see much in terms of a practical how-to guide to deal with those instances when your spidey sense goes into overdrive and you feel something is terribly wrong. Even when you realize you're dealing with someone whose behavior seems to go well beyond your garden-variety theological twit or smarmy shaman, you can't quite put your finger on why you're having such a strong gut reaction toward a certain person or setting.

Half of the harm that is done in this world
Is due to people who want to feel important.
They don't mean to do harm—but the harm does not interest them.
Or they do not see it, or they justify it
Because they are absorbed in the endless struggle
To think well of themselves.

—T. S. Eliot, *The Cocktail Hour*⁷

How can anyone exude this Chakra or Christlike charm in public while lashing out Lucifer-like the nanosecond something doesn't go their way? On the one hand, you know how speaking out against their spectral sh*t will most likely get you kicked to the curb where you can sit with the other missional misfits, but you also know you'll lose your sanity if you continue walking around on eggshells knowing any missteps on your part could awaken their inner spiritual narcissist.

What are the signs that a divine leader has gone from being a pious piper drawing people toward the light to yet another spiritual shill out for their own self-aggrandizement and personal gain? And why in god or goddess' name do people flock to such unpastoral P. T. Barnums?

Gaslighting for God will begin to answer these questions by identifying the narcissistic tendencies I've witnessed in my capacity as a religious satirist over the decades reporting on unholy hucksters. I will examine those placed in positions of power within Christian and other spiritual settings who lack any self-awareness regarding their inability to express genuine empathy or compassion toward others, as well as the planet as a whole.

For those who feel they could never entangle themselves in this web of lies and strange behaviors, Thomas Erikson, author of *Surrounded by Narcissists: How to Effectively Recognize, Avoid, and*

Defend Yourself Against Toxic People, reminds us that narcissists seek out people who are their opposites: “We are empathic, and we want the best for others. Our hearts, if you will, are too big. We feel compassion for the weak, we possess emotional intelligence, and we have genuine confidence, which the narcissists can’t emulate.”⁸ Even if you are turned off by a narcissist’s moves, unfortunately, they may be all too interested in attaching themselves to you by charming the pants off you figuratively, and sometimes literally. The more empathetic you are toward them, the more the subtlety of their tactics may leave you wondering what hit you.

I hope this book will aid those interested in exploring their spirituality in identifying the spiritual narcissists in their midst by giving twenty-first-century spiritual seekers the tools to not only survive but thrive when confronting these destructive energies. I will also touch on those who have left Christianity and see how they are subjected to the same toxic institutional dynamics. Then, I will offer signs of healthy spiritual communities led by those with the capacity to demonstrate true empathy. Finally, I will provide a list of resources for those harmed by spiritual abuses so they can explore how to help themselves heal from their wounds.

My dual MDiv/MSW degree from Yale Divinity School and Columbia University’s School of Social Work coupled with my work for *The Wittenburg Door*, *Spirituality & Health*, and other spiritual outlets might make me uniquely suited to diagnose spiritual narcissists. However, I will not play armchair analyst. For starters, I’m a religious satirist, not a licensed social worker. My calling is to serve as a guide for those seeking authentic spiritual communities by speaking truth to power through the vehicle of satire.

Hence, I have zippo interest in joining the growing hordes of self-appointed holy hucksters marketing themselves as religious trauma/narcissism experts and other Oprah-esque therapeutic trash.

And don't get me started on the devotional drivel that passes these days for spiritual self-help. Yes, there are a few diamonds in the rough, but most of what's out there ranges in quality from cubic zirconia to TikTok trinkets. Almost without exception these works should be reclassified in the fiction section, or better yet used as kindling where they can at least do some bit of good. Pass me the Pepto. Please.

My one bit of advice for those who wish to delve into the growing body of work focusing on narcissism and trauma (especially spiritual narcissism and religious trauma) is caveat emptor: let the buyer beware. Yes, it's ironic for an author to pen a book on this topic while encouraging readers to be mindful of their media consumption. But skim through the hordes of material on these topics, and you'll see how much of it is indeed schlock in desperate need of an editor, let alone a proper peer-review process.

Too often in our current cancel culture the word "narcissist" gets tossed about casually, akin to how the Christian church and other spiritual sorts throw around words like "godly," "enlightened," and "believer." In most cases, these pseudo-psychologists are referencing people who have an overly inflated and self-centered sense of self, not those who would fit the clinical definition for narcissism. I will attempt to do better by defining my terms: Throughout this book, whenever I use the word "narcissist," I use it as shorthand for those instances I see signs of specific behaviors common among those who possess extreme narcissistic tendencies to the point that their work harms rather than heals.

Once I've outlined the basic tenets of narcissism, I will unpack the unique dimensions of spiritual narcissism. What makes this particular form of narcissism pernicious not pastoral? I will leave the actual clinical diagnosis of Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) to those licensed therapists who are treating specific clients.

This will be followed by a compact guide to the various types of spiritual narcissists: exhibitionist, grandiose, royal, victim, seductive, communal, and malignant. To aid spiritual pilgrims in spotting spiritual narcissists, I will note their particular identifying markers, where they are found, and how to best approach them. Similar to a field guide that helps wilderness explorers identify healthy versus poisonous plants, this guide will delve into each type of narcissist using the categories used in the contemporary literature focusing on narcissism. By “literature,” I mean works penned by clinical therapists and others with actual expertise in this topic—none of this dubious diagnosing performed by a TikTok therapist.

Once spiritual seekers can ascertain when a particular setting does not bode well for their soul, I will offer hope for healing to recover from such egregious energies. While I acknowledge one can find abuses within any global religious or spiritual institution, I focus most of this book on U.S.-based #churchtoo abuses that continue to rock the Christian Industrial Complex. When applicable, I will touch on spiritual movements that attract those leaving Christianity who now find themselves repeating this spiritual spin cycle.

A key reason why this faith-based feculence continues is that those at the high end of the spiritual narcissism scale present a charismatic and compassionate facade that draws in their followers to hop on board their Missional Magical Mystery Tour. Their events are a helluva lot more fun when compared to your typical Sunday Service or boring Buddhist-lite lectures that too often come off as pruny, not praiseworthy. But should a whistleblower stand up and try to bring a particular spiritual icon’s darkness into the light, inevitably this sacred soul’s more sinister side will emerge, Tasmanian Devil-style.

On a personal note, this research enabled me, too, to see how my prior traumas led me to lash out whenever those self-appointed

Christian leaders and other spiritual sorts demeaned and demonized me when I questioned why their moves were commercialized, not Christlike. Since acquiring this knowledge coupled with somatic therapy (in my case EMDR [Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing]) did the trick,⁹ I've learned to depersonalize such spiritual slams and can now call out such ungodly gook without allowing the impact of their toxic theology to enter my body.

When I converse with others about these discoveries, I've noticed how they had similar ah-ha moments once they learned they were not the problem for speaking out when they observed something was amiss. Like me, they were in spiritual settings that left them drained and damaged.

How can we discern if a spiritual setting is mercurial and monied instead of, well, you know, just messy like Mike Yaconelli? More importantly, once we extricate ourselves from such a setting, how can we avoid re-entering similar spiritual spaces led by nefarious narcissists? Consider the manufactured messages offered by those trying to market themselves as the latest, greatest Christian Crusader, Tantra Titan, or some other monied moniker. Upon closer examination, their impact-driven marketing plan proves to be yet another attempt to garner enough social media hype so they can keep on pushing their fabricated fluff.

In the past, whistleblowers and survivors of narcissistic abuse were silenced by these missional manipulators via their "hedge of protection." This unspiritual shrubbery included such pernicious devices as NDAs, cease-and-desist summons, quasi-independent investigative agencies, crisis PR managers, and mandatory mediators, as well as the power of online media and fanatical fan bases to squelch any critiques. Along those lines, some self-proclaimed #churchtoo whistleblowers have their own abusive histories, as well as engaging in selective reporting that fails to address abuses in more progressive Christian settings.¹⁰

There's no spiritual swashbuckler on the horizon coming down the pastoral pike to rescue us, a la Westley from *The Princess Bride*. But lest we fall into a Pit of Despair, I see signs of hope on the horizon that have the potential to heal those affected by spiritual abuse. All signs point to a shift in public perception toward spiritual abuses as news cycles spew forth a steady stream of stories focusing on spiritual leaders caught buck nekkid—figuratively and at times literally. As expected, when confronted with their malicious misdeeds, these blasphemous bastards tend to go gonzo, irreligious rabbits caught in a Christian cage.

Thanks to the growing body of research into religious trauma and narcissism, we can learn how to avoid such toxic energies while we seek out places where we can not only survive but thrive on our spiritual journeys. Once we become aware whenever an individual, community, or even an entire institution exhibits signs of extreme narcissism, we can learn to walk away from those situations, even if they present themselves as healing oases filled with living water. When we step in a bit too deep, we realize they're contaminated cesspools containing god or goddess only knows what. But once we leave behind that spiritual stench, we can seek out actual living water that can truly transform us and connect us together in our shared humanity.

Can localized grassroots movements bring about a global shift toward transformational change? Or will these sparks of hope crystallize into yet another institutional model that will elevate some while repressing others? Time will tell, but we'll never know if we don't at least try.

But before we all come together to hold hands and sing Kum-baya (on second thought, maybe not), we have some collective healing to do. I hope this guidebook will lead to a greater understanding of the dynamics behind spiritual narcissism so folks can react in healthy ways whenever they meet those who blow off the Buddha,

cash in their chakras, or bastardize the Beatitudes. Unless we choose to live a hermit lifestyle or blindly inhabit a biblical bubble that's more influencer- than inspiration-driven, we will continue to be impacted by these energies as we pursue our spiritual paths.

So think of this book as a can of religious Raid, an evangelistic extermination device that can help rid your soul of those Christian cockroaches, spiritual snakes, and other venomous vermin that have infested too many spaces to the point that such dwellings are no longer holy or even habitable.

The long painful history of the Church is the history of people ever and again tempted to choose power over love, control over the cross, being a leader over being led. Those who resisted this temptation to the end and thereby give us hope are the true saints. One thing is clear to me: the temptation of power is greatest when intimacy is a threat. Much Christian leadership is exercised by people who do not know how to develop healthy, intimate relationships and have opted for power and control instead. Many Christian empire-builders have been people unable to give and receive love.

—Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian Leadership*¹¹

Extreme Narcissism Bingo¹²

Before we delve into the nuances of narcissism, here's a friendly bingo game designed to help you assess if a given "difficult" spiritual sage is a prickly personality or a full-blown narcissist. If you can't get to bingo, odds are you're dealing with the former. But when dealing with someone at the extreme end of the narcissistic spectrum, expect to yell out "bingo" multiple times.

Protector in public but predator in private	It's YOUR fault they're so self-absorbed	Thinks "love" is a four-letter swear word	Revenge served cold is their favorite dish	Emotional regulation button is broken
Saves money on electricity bills by gaslighting	Dares to discipline others but crumbles when critiqued	Their plagiarism checker keeps backfiring	Must be #1 dominant alpha dog	Filled with fantasies of their fabulousness
Favorite hobby is fishing for compliments	Magical ability to transform conversations into monologues	FREE (Kinda, sorta)	Thinks their spiritual sh*t smells like sunflowers	Exploits others' weaknesses for fun and profit
Diet consists of anything that feeds their ego	Skillful seduction followed by ghastly ghosting	Uses charm and cash to cover up crimes	Becomes a rageaholic when told "no"	Must win at all costs even when playing kiddie games
Worships themselves as their own god	Treats people like possessions	Believes boundaries are B.S.	Puts smartphone on selfie mode 24/7	Loves to play the shame game

About the Author

As a religious satirist, Becky Garrison served as senior contributing editor for *The Wittenburg Door* from 1994 to 2008, and has been on its board of directors since its relaunch in 2021. She's the author of eleven books, including *Jesus Died for This? A Satirist's Search for the Risen Christ* and *Distilled in Washington: A History*. Also, she co-edited a book of love letters penned by partners of trans folks to their loved ones, as well as contributing chapters to about a dozen other books. She lives in the Pacific Northwest, where she covers the region's craft culture, including cider, beer, wine, spirits, cannabis/CBD, psychedelics, and the regional festival scene.