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BOOK REVIEWS

Review of *When Narcissism Comes to Church: Healing Your Community from Emotional and Spiritual Abuse*

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When Narcissism Comes to Church: Healing Your Community from Emotional and Spiritual Abuse. By Chuck DeGroat. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020. 192 pages.

The occurrence of dysfunctional behavior in an individual within a family, team, or religious community affects the whole system. This is certainly true when that behavior is narcissistic in nature. Narcissistic behavior is described as "a pattern of grandiosity, need for admiration, and lack of empathy."[1] Religious leaders, congregants, and even the whole system can engage in narcissistic behavior. Religious leaders, as observed in the moral failure of ministry leaders in the news cycle of the last decade, may be particularly susceptible to narcissistic behaviors, as indicated by multiple studies.[2] Their actions hurt those they are called to serve, and the lives of the abused are seriously impacted. Leaders exhibiting narcissistic behavior can shatter religious communities that are supposed to be places of peace and hope. Moreover, religious communities who have experienced narcissistic leadership often carry the scars of abuse long after the leader has gone. Some communities even adopt the narcissistic leader's behaviors, forming a narcissistic culture magnifying the problem. Narcissistic abuse is a devastating form of trauma. And yet, religious communities and leaders are not without hope: narcissistic behaviors can be addressed before they devastate lives and communities.

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1 American Psychiatric Association (APA), *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)*, 5th ed. (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), 645.

2 Elizabeth G. Ruffing et al., "Humility and Narcissism in Clergy: A Relational Spirituality Framework," *Pastoral Psychology* 67, no. 5 (July 23, 2018): 525–45. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-018-0830-4

In *When Narcissism Comes to Church,* Chuck DeGroat examines narcissism within religious communities and by their leaders. DeGroat, who is a licensed therapist and professor of pastoral care, also serves as a psychological assessor of future pastors for the Reformed Church in America. His book is a resource for ministers without backgrounds in counseling or psychology. Though he engages with psychological research, it is an accessible and readable book on the topic of narcissism. His stated goal is "that this book will invite each of us to ask how we participate in narcissistic systems while providing clear resources for those traumatized by narcissistic relationships, particularly in the church."[3]

DeGroat brings clarity to terms like narcissist, narcissism, and gaslighting, terms that are used too flippantly and too frequently as accusations against political and social opponents.[4] He provides a practical understanding of narcissism and how it affects communities, emphasizing narcissism is not just a problem affecting leaders. DeGroat explores the tendencies toward narcissistic behaviors in both ministers and in those they serve. He then suggests methods of mitigating narcissistic behaviors in the readers' own lives and suggests a few methods to foster healing in those who have been wounded by narcissism. His tone is pastoral yet firm, addressing narcissism "with deadly seriousness, but also to envision a compassionate way forward."[5]

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition, commonly referred to as the DSM-5, outlines the criteria an individual must meet to be diagnosed with Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD).[6] An individual must meet five or more of the following criteria:[7]

- Has a grandiose sense of self-importance.
- Is preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love.
- Believes that he or she is "special" and unique and can only be understood by, or should associate with, other special or high-status people (or institutions).
- Requires excessive admiration.
- Has a sense of entitlement.

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3 DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church*, 4.

4 DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church*, 3.

5 DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church*, 6.

6 The DMS-5 was updated to the DSM-5-TR (Text Revision) most recently in September 2024. Since DeGroat addresses the DMS-5 specially in his book, this review will use the same source as DeGroat. The diagnostic criteria in both editions remain the same.

7 APA, *DSM-5*, 669-70.

- Has interpersonally oppressive behavior.
- Lacks empathy.
- Is often envious of others or believes that others are envious of him or her.
- Shows arrogant, haughty behaviors or attitudes.

DeGroat critiques the DSM-5's diagnostic approach because the binary of the either/or methodology used may not be enough to address real needs of individuals and communities. The DSM-V [*sic*]," asserts DeGroat, "doesn't say everything that needs to be said about narcissism."[8] He claims the DSM-5 allows for "subtler and sometimes even more insidious" behaviors to go unchecked.[9] DeGroat's problem with the either/or criteria is also recognized by the DSM-5 itself. It states, "Many highly successful individuals display personality traits that might be considered narcissistic. Only when these traits are inflexible, maladaptive, and persisting...do they constitute narcissistic personality disorder."[10] In response, DeGroat developed and uses an alternative approach toward narcissism, the "Narcissistic Spectrum."[11] DeGroat's Narcissistic Spectrum approach is responsive to people who are not diagnosable but still exhibit concerning narcissistic behaviors. Therefore, though DeGroat's spectrum approach stands at odds with the strictly diagnostic approach, his spectrum approach is set to identify the therapeutic needs of a wider range of individuals.

DeGroat's Narcissistic Spectrum puts narcissism on a range from healthy narcissism to toxic narcissism.[12] Healthy narcissism is described as living humbly and confidently. Toxic narcissism is the pathological and diagnosable narcissism found in the DSM-5. Everyone falls somewhere on the spectrum. Utilizing the Narcissistic Spectrum, DeGroat considers how subtle narcissistic behaviors may present themselves across the nine personality types of the Enneagram to "put flesh on the bones of a theory."[13] He argues that the Enneagram, one of many personality typing systems, is a helpful tool in exploring narcissism because it identifies "disordered patterns and habits of relating."[14] He examines real-world examples from his practice. His use of the Enneagram to explore how narcissistic behaviors may express themselves in different personality types challenges the caricatures of narcissism that

8 APA, *DSM-5*, 36.

9 APA, *DSM-5*, 36.

10 APA, *DSM-5*, 672.

11 DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church*, 37.

12 DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church*, 36-38.

13 DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church*, 45.

14 DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church*, 46.

only those like the "grandiose politician or megachurch pastor" can have narcissistic behaviors.[15] He acknowledges this is a novel move, stating, "To my knowledge, no one has made a clear connection between the Enneagram and personality disorders before."[16]

After his exploration of how narcissistic behaviors manifest in different personality types, DeGroat surveys the characteristics of narcissism within church systems. Using the analogy of an infection, he explains that the narcistic behavior of an individual—pastor or otherwise—may spread throughout the church body, creating a culture or system of narcissism.[17] The culture of narcissism often subsists even after removal of the initiating individual. Of the two types of narcissistic systems identified by DeGroat, grandiose and vulnerable narcissistic systems, the grandiose narcissistic system is more easily identifiable because of its collective arrogance, self-importance, and entitlement. It is the church system that "looks more like a cut-throat corporation than a Christlike ministry."[18] More difficult to discern is the vulnerable narcissistic system, which manifests as a perpetual "low self-esteem narcissism."[19] The system prides itself in its woundedness and/or weakness in the guise of humility, resisting its own cultural healing and health. The system's wounded identity is essentially its own kind of self-importance.

He concludes the book with a chapter on how to facilitate healing in both individuals and churches. DeGroat describes the "Healing Journey," which draws on the Exodus narrative.[20] The trauma of narcissism is likened to the slavery of Egypt, and the traumatized individual or church must acknowledge the trauma and leave it. Healing is found in the wilderness, where "we gain a greater awareness of the extent of the trauma, untangle twisted systemic dynamics, heal wounds, and lament."[21] Only then is the victim(s) of narcissism able to enter into the promised land, "a new space of inner freedom and relational flourishing."[22] The healing journey requires that individuals "engage the trauma intentionally and seek wise guides to direct them along the way."[23]

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15 DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church*, 45, 47.

16 DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church*, 48.

17 DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church*, 103.

18 DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church*, 106.

19 DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church*, 108.

20 DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church*, 133-134.

21 DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church*, 137.

22 DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church*, 137.

23 DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church*, 146.

DeGroat's usage of the Narcissistic Spectrum in combination with the Enneagram is an innovative way to explore how harmful narcissistic behaviors may show up in religious communities, even if those behaviors do not rise to the level of NPD. The book also serves as a mirror for readers to reflect on how they may be presenting narcissistic behaviors. Unlike the DSM-5's either/or diagnostic categorization, all people fall on DeGroat's Narcissistic Spectrum, which calls the reader—who is assumed to be a religious leader—to self-reflection and potential change. DeGroat invites readers to a deeper personal awareness and intentionality regarding their own behaviors.

Despite its strengths, *When Narcissism Comes to Church* falls short of its advertised subtitle, *Healing Your Community from Emotional and Spiritual Abuse.* This is the least developed portion of DeGroat's book, and it feels rushed and ambiguous. DeGroat offers very few tangible steps or practices other than the ostensibly vague encouragement of pursing "awareness and intentionality."[24] What this means exactly or how a religious leader does this with his or her church is unclear. Perhaps a better subtitle for the book would be *Preventing* (or *Mitigating*) *Narcissistic Emotional and Spiritual Abuse in Your Community*. The book's strengths are found in these topics.

Though not written with military chaplains in mind, narcissistic behaviors occur within military religious contexts as well, both in chapel and unit settings. Chaplains may find value in this book in two primary ways. First, *When Narcissism Comes to Church* brings some clarity to a topic that has gained notoriety in popular psychology. Leaders with whom we disagree are often accused of being narcissists. The book provides an introductory education on clinically diagnosable narcissism, as well as DeGroat's own approach. This background will help chaplains speak intelligibly and minister more confidently to leaders and interdisciplinary teams when encountering suspected narcissism in the soldiers and families they serve. Second, the nature of DeGroat's writing invites readers to examine their own potential narcissistic behaviors. While clinically diagnosable NPD is statistically unlikely to be found in the average chaplain, the culture of the military may foster certain narcissistic behaviors in a chaplain that could diminish their ministerial impact. A chaplain finding his or her identity and value in awards, positions, degrees, etc. at the cost of his or her high calling can begin to look like "patterns of grandiosity, need for admiration, and lack of empathy."[25] To be clear: the pursuit of and the value placed on these awards, positions, degrees, etc. do not necessarily indicate narcissistic behaviors within a chaplain—they are a part of our profession after all. DeGroat challenges us to take a moment to reflect on our own motivations and pursue healthy forms of life and leadership.

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24 DeGroat, *When Narcissism Comes to Church*, 141.

25 APA, *DSM-5,* 645.

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