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Has Alcoholics Anonymous Declared Itself a Religion?

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Larry K., an AA member of many years was frustrated at what he considered to be the increasing religiosity of AA meetings in the Toronto area. So in 2009, he started two secular AA meetings. However in 2011, Toronto Intergroup removed both secular groups from its website and phone listings claiming that a belief in God was necessary for membership. As Larry K. noted, "...we lost our membership and our voice and our vote... We weren't allowed to speak in our own defense or make appeals or anything."

After receiving no meaningful responses to his written requests for explanations, Larry K. took his complaint to the Human Rights Tribunal, charging discrimination. One of the few ways that Toronto Intergroup could avoid the stigma of bias was to declare itself a religion, which indeed it did do. As part of a strategy to defend itself the Toronto Intergroup stated, "... it is a bona fide requirement that groups that wish to be part of this intergroup must have a belief in the higher power of God."

Because this debate is so highly charged, repercussions may be felt across the world of recovery. The recent explosion of opioid addiction has added millions who might well benefit from such programs.

According to AA literature, "...any group of alcoholics gathered together for sobriety may call themselves an AA group provided that, as a group, they have no other purpose or affiliation." And each AA group may, "...conduct its internal affairs as it wishes—it being merely requested to abstain from acts that might injure AA as a whole..."

In brief, this is how AA is organized: AA's parent body is A.A. World Services, Inc. (A.A.W.S.), and its articles of incorporation specifically distinguish and distance it from local AA groups. The groups themselves are separate and autonomous entities, although A.A.W.S. holds the copyrights to all AA publications for AA groups around the world.

Critical to this arrangement are "intergroups," which might be likened to local co-ops. Intergroups are established by individual groups, usually in cities, to coordinate services. Primarily they maintain a roster of meetings, with times, days and locations, and often operate a telephone hot-line for alcoholics. It should be noted that A.A.W.S. also maintains that, "it has no connection or control over any Intergroup." – a claim questioned by some.

So it was the Toronto Intergroup that took it upon itself without consulting A.A.W.S. to delist the two secular groups in the Toronto area and invoke religion as its reasoning.

Whether a group is or is not listed by an Intergroup might seem unimportant, perhaps even trivial. However, for those who think that they might have a drinking problem, or for AA members from out of town, or even for active local AA members merely seeking a new or different meeting, the most common method for locating a meeting is either online or over the phone. To be excluded from this essential public information denies most people the broader choices that might help them get sober. (Full disclosure: I am a long-time member of AA, and a recently retired board member of the International Convention of Secular Alcoholics Anonymous. However, I speak here only for myself).

My personal experience strongly suggests that attendees of secular AA meetings are not whiners, nor do they want to "convert" anyone to atheism. And of course, if you are non-believer (or "other" believer") and you really want to get sober, you can probably endure a modicum of religiosity. But after a few years the constant testimony from others that sobriety is "a gift of God" begins to wear on you. It's not unlike having to sing, pray, and listen to sermons before being able to receive a meal at the Salvation Army.

(Just to be clear: I use the term “non-believer” in its broadest, most all-inclusive sense, which embraces agnostics, atheists, free thinkers, brights, skeptics, non-theists, naturalists, materialists, humanists, rationalists, secularists, et al).

The nature of addiction – be it to alcohol, opioids, cocaine, or marijuana – is such that it deludes the abuser into thinking that there is no problem even though evidence to the contrary abounds. Therefore even the slightest reason not to begin a life in recovery can derail an alcoholic. We’ll never know how many people who might otherwise have been helped by AA (or any other recovery program) have walked into a meeting only to be put off when they see “God” all over the suggested 12 Steps, and hear “No sobriety without God,” and who then turn around and walk out, never to return.

Those newcomers who stay and demonstrate even the slightest degree of religious skepticism are told to think of “God” as “Good Orderly Direction,” or “Group Of Drunks,” or even the proverbial “door knob.” For the newbie the inference is not to get hung up on the religious stuff; but to just let it wash over you. In the end, after you get some sobriety under your belt you will “come to believe” just as we “old timers” in AA have done.

There is a popular, rather laissez-faire expression in AA, “Take what you want and leave the rest.” However, for the true believers, the questioning of AA without God, is the “third rail” of the recovery movement. And there are definite legal repercussions as well. Although AA is not a religion in the commonly accepted sense of the word, the US Supreme Court has ruled that it is religious to the extent that forcing people to attend AA meetings could violate their constitutional rights.

In one case, Barry Hazle of Shasta County, California, was paroled from prison after serving part of his sentence for meth possession. As a condition of his parole, Hazle was mandated to attend a drug treatment program, a program requiring his belief in a “higher power.” A life-long atheist, Hazle resisted and was sent back to prison to complete his sentence. He sued the State of California, and several years later was awarded \$1,950,000. Had the judge had the option to send Mr. Hazle to secular meetings, this costly outcome might have been avoided.

In several other cases, courts have similarly ruled, although AA never maintained that “...a belief in the higher power of God” is necessary for membership. In fact, the AA Preamble” states, “The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking.”

Allow me to describe a typical, conventional AA meeting: The overwhelming majority of meetings are held in church basements (“They save your soul upstairs. We save your ass down here.”) The suggested 12 Steps & 12 Traditions (Link to the 12 and 12) along with other AA slogans are hung on the walls.

The opening remarks usually contain the AA Preamble, and the reading of some excerpts from AA conference-approved literature, which can get fairly religious. The most common selection is “How it Works,” which contains the 12 Steps, and ends with “...Without help it is too much for us. But there is One who has all power — that One is God. May you find Him now!”

A featured speaker (just another AA member) then shares his or her “experience, strength and, hope” for about 15 to 20 minutes, followed by a secretary’s break (passing the hat, and announcements), followed by other attendees “sharing” from the floor (in which belief and thanks to a Higher Power are often heard), and then the meeting’s closing remarks are read which again can get fairly pious. Finally, all rise, hold hands and recite “The Lord’s Prayer” (or less frequently, “The Serenity Prayer”).

Secular AA meetings do not differ much: most notably, the 12 Steps are not on display; and the opening statements usually just include the AA Preamble and sometimes the addition of a “Secular AA Preamble.” Most importantly, there is no mention of God or Higher Power. The secretary’s break still includes passing the hat and making announcements, followed by “sharing” from the floor. Anyone can share anything, including their particular beliefs, non-beliefs, or no religious preferences at all.

The closing remarks again make no mention of God or Higher Power, but usually refer to a long-standing AA dictum, “Whenever anyone, anywhere, reaches out for help I want the hand of AA always to be there. And for that, I am responsible.” After which all rise, hold hands and recite an AA slogan, “Live and Let Live.” There is no prayer.

When it started in the 1930’s, the decade after Prohibition, Alcoholics Anonymous, was greatly influenced by the Oxford Group, a then recently moribund, intensely Christian movement; hence AA’s close relationship with Christianity. So it’s not surprising that most of AA’s original members were primarily white, male Christians, and in many respects Christianity remains AA’s default posture today.

The book, Alcoholics Anonymous, written mostly in the late 1930’s by one of AA’s co-founders, Bill W., is always referred to as the “Big Book.” It maintains an outdated view of society written in ponderous prose. As with many other institutions, AA has its share of “originalists” – those who insist on a rather rigid interpretation of the Big Book and AA. Some of these fundamentalists go on to refer to a “bigger book,” by which they mean the Bible. In certain parts of the country members have been known to rise, state their name, and recite, “I’m an alcoholic and a sinner.” In fact, some of these uber believers maintain that the real goal in AA is not to achieve sobriety necessarily, but instead to form a deeper bond and belief in God.

Many of Bill W’s writings are revered as if they were the “Federalist Papers“ of AA. Here is part of his letter of May 4, 1957: “To begin with, the Steps are not enforceable upon anyone—they are only suggestions. A belief in the Steps or in God is not in any way requisite for A.A. membership. Therefore, we have no means of compelling anyone to stay away from A.A. because he does not believe in God or the Twelve Steps. In fact, A.A. has a technique of reducing rebellion among doubting people by deliberately inviting them to disagree with everything we believe in.”

Despite writings like this, some AA members – including fragile newcomers – are still told that they will drink without a belief in God. In 1956, the American Medical Association declared alcoholism a disease – a medical model also embraced by AA. That would make alcoholism the sole disease that can only be “cured” (or arrested) by a belief in a Higher Power.

The range of believers in AA reflects the US population at large. This spectrum varies from the very devout to those who don’t give faith too much thought. So you might ask, “Why the anger?” Ironically,

it is usually the most pious both in and out of AA who feel the most threatened by non-believers. For those believers in AA who are convinced that sobriety is only possible with a belief in a Higher Power, non-believers in AA pose a threat to their sobriety as well.

So is AA (at least in Toronto) a religion? As with many corporate agreements, the party accused of wrongdoing usually “settles,” which means that the corporation pays a fine, but never admits to any “wrongdoing.” Such was the case in February. (Link to Toronto Minutes). After mediation, Toronto Intergroup backtracked and claimed it wasn’t a religion after all, and stated “The Respondent does not admit liability....” The two secular meetings “...can be listed in the GTA Intergroup...regardless of the specific beliefs or practices of the group members or the group as a whole...”

One would think that the exclusion of non-believers was an outlier position since many secular AA groups are listed by their local Intergroups. And we might even take heart since the Vancouver, B.C. and Vancouver, WA Intergroups, perhaps prodded by the Toronto agreement, have changed their policies and have now decided to list all groups including those self-described as secular. However, cities such as Denver and Fresno still refuse to include their secular brethren. (And it should be noted that even in “pagan” New York City secular AA groups were forced to scrub any altered versions of the 12 Steps so as not to offend those who wanted to delist them as well).

Secular AA is not anti-religious, but rather non-religious, and this is not a new phenomenon. The first secular AA groups were founded in Chicago, and have been in existence for over 35 years. Today there are over 300 groups worldwide, having doubled in number in the last two years. (Link to www.SecularAA.org)

But we are not talking about a secular take-over of conventional AA. Secular AA is still but a small fraction of the total AA membership (over 2,000,000 at last count). Nor does secular AA want to convert anyone to anything. Rather, it just wants conventional AA to be inclusive instead of exclusive. Secular AA does not question the deeply held convictions of believers, but insists on mutual respect given to all AA members. There are attendees at secular meetings who are believers but who prefer to keep religion and sobriety separate, talking about God in church, and talking about sobriety in AA meetings. It’s hard to describe the liberation one feels when there is no official religious talk at AA meetings. And it’s hard to go back.

Coincident with the explosion of opioid addiction Americans now seem to realize that the best way to deal with substance abuse of all types is with treatment rather than punishment. If conventional AA wants to be an active participant in the 21st century it would do well to shed it’s 1930’s Christian-centric ideology, and make a sincere effort at pluralism. Discrimination against non-believers is one of the last remaining forms of socially acceptable bigotry.

Non-religious members of AA do not want to “take God out of AA.” Rather, they want to add meetings where the insistence on a belief in God is not a requirement for sobriety. They do not want to have to accept any one else’s beliefs, nor have to deny their own.

Vic Losick is a documentary filmmaker based in New York City. © Vic Losick MMXVII All Rights Reserved