

Alcoholics Anonymous, Without the Religion

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Three floors above a Manhattan street of loading docks and coffee shops, in a functional room of folding chairs and linoleum tile, a man who introduced himself as Vic began to speak. “Today is my 35th anniversary,” he said. The dozen people seated around him applauded, and several even whooped in support.

By most overt measures, this gathering two weeks ago was just another meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous, one of its multitude of meetings worldwide. At the session’s end an hour later, however, as the participants clasped hands, instead of reciting the Lord’s Prayer in usual A.A. fashion, they said together, “Live and let live.”

This meeting, as the parting phrase suggests, is one of a growing number within A.A. that appeal to nonreligious people in recovery, who might variously describe themselves as agnostics, atheists, humanists or freethinkers. While such groups were rare even a decade ago, now they number about 150 nationally. A first-ever convention will be held in November in Santa Monica, Calif.

The boom in nonreligious A.A. represents another manifestation of a more visible and confident humanist movement in the United States, one that has featured public figures such as Bill Maher, Sam Harris and the late Christopher Hitchens. Yet this recent trend within A.A. also marks a departure from the organization’s traditional emphasis on religion.

“A.A. starts at its core with honesty,” said Dorothy, 39, who heads the steering committee for the We Agnostics and Freethinkers International A.A. Convention. “And how can you be honest in recovery if you’re not honest in your own beliefs? If you don’t believe in the God they’re praying to, that’s not honest practice.”

(A.A. members hold to a tradition of not being identified by full name. I sat in on a portion of one secular A.A. meeting with the advance consent of the attendees.)

Seven of A.A.’s famous 12 steps refer either to a deity — “God,” “Him” or “a Power greater than ourselves” — or to religious practices such as prayer. The ultimate goal of sobriety, as the final step states, is to achieve a “spiritual awakening.” Besides the Lord’s Prayer, the Serenity Prayer is a staple of A.A. meetings.

Many of A.A.’s foundational documents do simultaneously emphasize an open, inclusive, nonjudgmental attitude toward anyone seeking sobriety. The group’s basic text, “Alcoholics Anonymous,” notes that membership “should be an entirely personal affair which each one decides for himself in the light of past associations or his present choice.”

In practice, though, a religious tone became the norm within A.A. What it meant for alcoholics like Vic was an anguishing choice between sobriety and hypocrisy. To participate in a typical A.A. meeting felt to them like hiding, if not violating, deeply held secular beliefs.

Now 70 and working in the film industry, Vic began drinking on a Saturday night at age 15 when his parents left their New Jersey home long enough for him and several friends to drain a bottle of Southern Comfort. Not for the last time, his binge ended with projectile vomit.

It was also during Vic's teenage years when he began to reject the Roman Catholicism of his upbringing. The first doubt came when a priest informed him that if he ate a hamburger on Friday, in defiance of the Catholic Church's tradition of forgoing meat on that day, he would go to hell.

During all the subsequent decades of drinking, the closest Vic got to faith was what he puckishly calls his "foxhole prayer" — to make it through his hangover. Liquor led to cocaine, and one night in 1979, Vic's dealer laid out something new, a few lines of heroin. Even through the ethereal haze, Vic was frightened enough to decide to go to A.A.

That first meeting, characteristically enough, took place in a church. "I was willing to try anything," Vic recalled. "If they say to pray on your knees morning and night ..." For his first several years in A.A., he did regularly pray, trying to reacquire a faith he thought sobriety required. Even after accepting the fact he still did not believe God existed, he kept attending meetings, feeling privately isolated despite the camaraderie and common purpose.

Glenn, a painter living in Manhattan, had a similar experience to Vic's. When he first went to an A.A. meeting 27 years ago, he found himself confronted by religious language and ritual that he considered anathema. Desperate to stop drinking, he tried to fit in.

"They had this fake-it-till-you-make-it attitude," recalled Glenn, 72. "This feeling that the religion will catch up with you. It worked in the sense that I got sober. But I got weary of it. It felt mindless."

After 10 years without alcohol, Glenn ordered a glass of wine and spent the next five years suffering from what he wryly diagnoses now as "the merlot flu."

Soon after resuming A.A., though, he heard about a meeting designed for atheists. Though he found that group dogmatic in its own way — more concerned with criticizing religion than with reinforcing sobriety — he subsequently discovered a meeting for humanists and freethinkers.

In its "fellowship of concerned, loving people," he said, he found a secular version of the "Higher Power" to which A.A. literature refers. Humanist A.A. groups also have drafted their own nontheistic versions of the 12 steps. Instead of needing divine assistance for recovery, for example, one step states that "we needed strengths beyond our awareness and resources to restore us to sanity."

By now, Glenn has sponsored seven humanists into A.A. He regularly attends three secular A.A. meetings each week. Similarly, Vic goes to four nonreligious A.A. meetings weekly. Those seven meetings are among the 13 currently operating in New York, according to the website agnosticaanyc.org, which itself was formed only in 2002.

Deliberately or not, secular members like Vic and Glenn seem unable to resist a certain brand of wordplay. Speaking of nonreligious A.A.'s legitimacy, Vic put it, "We're kosher." As for the effect, Glenn said, "It's heaven."