

AA and the Lord's Prayer



All [women and] men are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and of any human power, in such wise that no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his [or her] own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others.

The Catholic Church, Vatican II, 1965

By Roger C.

The Lord's Prayer – "Our Father who art in Heaven" – is a venerated Christian Prayer. It can be found in the New Testament in two places: in the Gospel of Matthew with a shorter version in the Gospel of Luke. It was taught by Jesus as the way to pray and it is universally understood to be the summary of the religion of Christianity.

In the United States, the Lord's Prayer – or any other prayer, for that matter – has been prohibited in public schools since 1962. This was the result of a Supreme Court decision in which Justice Hugo Black, delivering the opinion of the Court, affirmed that the State should not in any way "ordain or support" any religion.

In Canada, the public use of the Lord's Prayer ended in 1988. At that time the Ontario Court of Appeal heard a case in which several parents objected to prayer at the beginning of the school day. Their children – non-Christians – would have to leave the room if they did not wish to participate in the recitation of the prayer.

The Ontario Court of Appeal ruled that the "recitation of the Lord's Prayer, which is a Christian prayer... impose(s) Christian observances upon non-Christian pupils and religious observances on non-believers" and constituted a violation of the freedom of conscience and religion provisions in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

That ended the use of the Lord's Prayer in schools not only in Ontario but in all parts of Canada.

So what about AA and the Lord's Prayer?

Across North America most traditional AA meetings end with the Lord's Prayer. People stand up, hold hands, and recite the "Our Father who art in Heaven..." out loud.

And please note: some AA members are extremely dogmatic when it comes to the Lord's Prayer. I once submitted a motion to have my AA District stop ending its meetings with it and was literally told by the Chair of the meeting to "get the fuck out of AA".

How could this possibly happen in the AA fellowship?

Well, AA began a long, long time ago. In 1935. In especially Christian communities, such as Akron, Ohio. And, moreover, the "co-founders of Alcoholics Anonymous met through the Oxford Group... a Christian organization founded by an American Christian missionary". (Wikipedia)

Perhaps not surprisingly then, the word "God", or a variation of it, appears 281 times in the first 164 pages of the book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, published in 1939.

And let me add this: by and large, it's an ancient and out-dated conception of God. I say this as someone who studied religion for almost a decade, and read the books in the New Testament, at the Faculty of Religious Studies at McGill University.

A bit of the Lord's Prayer:

*Our Father who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread...*

So this particular god is understood as anthropomorphic, male and interventionist.

Anthropomorphic and male. A god with human attributes and of a male gender: "Our Father who art in Heaven". A guy in the sky, as it is sometimes derisively put. (Or sometimes not derisively. At my first AA meeting in a rehab, the speaker said he owed his recovery to a guy in the sky. I was, I will admit, stunned.)

Interventionist. This is a characteristic of this god that is most shared within AA. In "How It Works", chapter 5 in *Alcoholics Anonymous*, which is read at most traditional AA meetings, Bill Wilson wrote: "God could and would if He were sought". He could and would do what? Well, get and keep you sober of course. No matter what else is going on in the world, one of His main functions apparently is to help the alcoholic in recovery.

Now let me be clear and interrupt myself for just one paragraph: There are without question other conceptions of god, both in the world at large and yes, in AA. And I am not just talking about religions now. Some of these conceptions of "god" are more personal, contemporary and not in the least related to any form of religious dogmatism. They can be exploratory and, rather simply, a part of spiritual

growth. This “spiritual growth” is something that Sam Harris describes in his book, [Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion](#), as a form of “self-transcendence”, that is, growth in which an individual comes to understand the world beyond the obsessive characteristics of her or his ego consciousness. I personally laud spiritual growth as a part of recovery, indeed, as a part of life itself.

Okay. Back to AA and the Lord’s Prayer.

My message is very simple: AA meetings must stop ending with the Lord’s Prayer.

Two reasons.

First, it is a contradiction and violation of Alcoholics Anonymous itself. AA insists that while it is indeed spiritual, it is not, nor should it be in any way, religious. Well Christianity is a religion. And The Lord’s Prayer is a Christian prayer. To suggest otherwise is an appalling act of ignorance or hypocrisy. Or both.

If you don’t believe that then re-read what the United States Supreme Court had to say. It removed prayer from schools because it recognized that it should not “ordain or support” any religion. You can also re-read what the Ontario Court of Appeal had to say: the “recitation of the Lord’s Prayer, which is a Christian prayer... impose(s) Christian observances upon non-Christian pupils and religious observances on non-believers”.

AA needs to respect its own principles, its own self. Weird, but true? As it was put recently in [The Fix](#): “It is baffling why the Our Father – a prayer praising a conventional paternalistic, heaven-dwelling religious deity – still closes many meetings, as it directly contradicts the organization’s stated non-alignment with any sect or denomination, per its [Preamble](#)”.

Spiritual not religious? No outside affiliations? Then behave accordingly.

Second, the religiosity of the AA born in 1935 and the Lord’s Prayer is increasingly driving alcoholics out of meetings. AA needs to grow up. It needs to quit pumping “Conference approved” literature, virtually all of which is based on the ancient Godly thought of the mid twentieth century, and understand that it is now the twenty first century and that AA needs to recognize that and mature as an organization, a fellowship.

AA needs to modernize itself and thus be both more relevant and more inclusive, as if it were 2019 today and not 1935. It needs to discard the Lord’s Prayer. A vote at the General Service Conference by AA Area delegates and AA officials is all that would be needed.

Otherwise, as my friend Joe C put it years ago: “My bold prediction is that if AA doesn’t accommodate change and diversify, our 100th anniversary will be a fellowship of men and women with the same stature and relevance as the Mennonites; charming, harmless and irrelevant.”

Amen.

AA and the Lord’s Prayer was posted on AA Agnostica on February 3, 2019.
