

Unintended Consequences



By bob k

Earlier this month, AA Agnostica published its 500th article, and one HELL of a lot of people read it. The content of the essays posted here, over the years, has been quite diverse, as has been the authorship of those pieces. There have been contributors from England, Ireland, Australia, and Scandinavia, and from all parts of Canada and the United States. The overall caliber of writing has been remarkable, and the impact of the website is beyond measurement. AA Agnostica began in June, 2011, with the primary purpose of posting the meeting times and locations of two Toronto groups that had been “delisted” by their local central office.

Originally a directory, the website very quickly evolved into the hub of an international movement of secularists in Alcoholics Anonymous.

To be clear, there was more to Toronto Intergroup’s actions at their May, 2011 gathering of group representatives, than merely removing the listings of two agnostic-friendly groups from its directory of AA meetings in the Greater Toronto Area. The unconventional groups were disenfranchised – voting rights regarding all AA affairs in their local region were removed. A year later, when a motion to relist the groups was considered, the two banished groups could neither speak for themselves, nor could they cast votes in favor of their own re-admission.



The groups were not “booted out of AA.” Toronto Intergroup lacked the power to do that, although they plainly did not lack the desire. The two non-conforming groups WERE kicked out

of Toronto AA. In the pre-internet days, delisting in and of itself, would have delivered a kiss of death. Who is going to come to your meeting if people can't find it, or even know that the group exists?

The spearheads of the movement to purify Alcoholics Anonymous did not stop at the limits of their own authority, but lobbied vigorously at the General Service level to get Beyond Belief and We Agnostics kicked out of AA entirely. Those particular efforts were unsuccessful, but the main mission was accomplished. Toronto AA had been decontaminated. Perhaps God's grace had determined that it be so.

Nonetheless, these groups did not wither and die. A third group, formed in Richmond Hill, was also delisted and disenfranchised in spite of showing some willingness to come into conformity. It was too late in the blood-letting to have rationality take a role in the proceedings.

Unintended Consequences

The idea of unintended consequences was popularized in the mid-twentieth century by sociologist, Robert Merton. Unintended consequences are said to come in three specific groups:

1. Unexpected benefits;
2. Unexpected drawbacks;
3. Perverse results – aka “backfires.”

I must confess to taking perverse pleasure from the perverse results that have arisen out of Toronto Intergroup's perverse prosecution.

It is a matter of absolute speculation as to what MIGHT have happened, had Toronto Intergroup simply let the two unconventional groups go unchallenged. Group autonomy and all that, after all. Would there have been an AA Agnostica? Maybe eventually? But certainly not when it developed – the purpose in June, 2011 being to provide notification of group times and locations.

With no delisting, there'd have been no need.

Thus it's time for a perverse “thank you” to those who pressed the issue of ostracizing the secular Toronto AA groups. Thanking Toronto Intergroup would be more than inaccurate as that body is in constant flux – reps changing, committees changing, and thankfully, attitudes changing. The delisting drive was spearheaded by a couple of members. Appropriately in an anonymous program, they will go unnamed, as will those from the 2011 and 2012 executive committee. Although one might have expected neutrality from the head table, that isn't what we got. Passions ran high. It cannot be hidden that a considerable amount of venom accompanied the righteousness as the blood-letting took its course.

The forces of anti-corruption were completely successful, until they weren't, but let's not get too far ahead of ourselves.

AA Agnostica pretty much immediately evolved into something far, far more than a listing resource. With the sting of the spurning of still fresh, the persecuted didn't wither and fade away. Instead, it rapidly became evident that the godless were not wordless. Weekly blogs appeared on a variety of subjects. As the readership spread to a worldwide audience, and the Toronto events became well-known, articulate heathens sent in essays from farther and farther afield. Some criticized the Toronto crusaders, who in their zeal to bring about the greater good, seem to have employed questionable means to bring about their desired ends.



On the night of the original purging, the agnostic groups were delisted within two hours. That the discussion was inadequate is evidenced by the 20% of groups that abstained from voting. Six months later, the motion to relist needed to be considered VERY carefully, over a period of six months. An "informed" group conscience was now something that was critical. Ultimately, the motion to relist was soundly defeated, and procedural changes were passed that would prevent any revisiting of the issue.

That coffin was nailed shut. Tight. The issue was OVER, until it wasn't.

A complaint was brought some time later before the Human Rights Commission of Ontario. It was groundless, I was told – sour grapes. The case was spurious, until it wasn't.

In the end, the two delisted groups have been relisted, and operate as they did in 2011. Across Southern Ontario, they have been joined by additional Toronto groups, and ones in Hamilton, Ajax, Newmarket, Mississauga, and Whitby. AA Agnostica has been visited two and a half million times – a remarkable number for this sort of special-interest website.

Thank you, Toronto Intergroup. Thank you, crusaders.

Thank you, perverse unintended consequences.

Thank you to a new attitude that has brought us three Lord's Prayer-less Ontario Regional Conferences, an atheist speaker in 2019, and talk of a secular panel in 2020. The wheels are turning slowly, but they are turning.

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