

The Purpose of AA Agnostica



By Roger C

This week AA Agnostica turned into an eight year old website! And a dynamic and busy site it truly is: in all, counting today's post, 522 articles have been published. That's an average of one and a quarter every single week. For eight years.

As our friend bob k put it in a recent article, [Unintended Consequences](#):

There have been contributors from England, Ireland, Poland, 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) very quickly evolved into the hub of an international movement of secularists in Alcoholics Anonymous.

And, although we had at one point planned to retire the website in 2015, our work goes on...

A Voice for Agnostics, Atheists and Freethinkers

AA Agnostica has two related purposes.

First, it's to provide a voice for agnostics, atheists and freethinkers. A crucial part of recovery is the feeling that "you are not alone". Non-theists often feel demeaned and even rejected at traditional AA meetings. We often cannot be honest about our own beliefs – or lack of beliefs – and, frankly, the inability to be honest is a serious obstacle to recovery.

There is far, far too much god in AA. The word “god” or a version thereof is used 281 times in the first 164 pages of the Big Book and in six of the 12 Steps. “How It Works” from Chapter 5 of the elderly Big Book is often read at the beginning of traditional AA meetings. It includes the godly 12 Steps and ends with the claim that if you need help staying sober “God could and would if He were sought”. If that weren’t enough, many (most?) meetings in North America end with the Lord’s Prayer. To then assert that AA is “spiritual not religious” is ignorance or hypocrisy.

One more point: the higher power thing. While you are told in your early days in AA that you can choose your own higher power – a doorknob if you want – the fact is that over time you are expected to come to understand that God is your higher power. You know, the One who “could and would if He were sought”. A Christian God: an anthropomorphic, male, interventionist deity. And if you don’t get to that God, well... You’ll go back out drinking and probably kill yourself.

That’s traditional AA.

There are some of us agnostics and atheists who can tolerate all of the above and attend these meetings (often we hold hands but don’t say the Lord’s Prayer at the end) but there are others who simply cannot or will not. No non-believer should ever be forced to attend a traditional AA meeting, which is the legal decision of Courts in the United States, which you can read about here: [The Courts, AA and Religion](#).

That’s why we fully support Byron Woods who lost his job because, an atheist, he refused to attend AA meetings. You can read about that right here: [Atheist nurse’s fight against mandatory AA will go before B.C. Human Rights Tribunal](#).

All of the above is why [About Us](#) on the AA Agnostica menu begins this way: “AA Agnostica is meant to be a helping hand for the alcoholic who reaches out to Alcoholics Anonymous for help and finds that she or he is disturbed by the religious content of many AA meetings”.

As a voice for agnostics, atheists and freethinkers over the last 12 months we posted a total of 62 articles. These were written by some 40 different authors mostly from the US, Canada, Great Britain and with one from Poland, Witek D who wrote [The Wave of Religiosity](#). The articles cover a wide variety of topics including book reviews, the growth of the secular AA movement, experience, strength and hope, research and the many paths to recovery. That’s a voice for non-theists in all parts of the world and with a variety of topics.

By far the most popular article over the last 12 months was posted last week, a review of [Staying Sober Without God](#). Now that’s a great book! And while *Staying Sober Without God* is not “Conference-approved” it is definitely “AA Agnostica-approved”.

Inclusion

It is very clear that the co-founder of AA, Bill Wilson, believed that the most important principle in AA was inclusion. Not god. Or the 12 Steps. Inclusion.

We agree. And that's the second purpose of AA Agnostica.

Time after time, speech after speech, Bill talked about the need for AA to be more inclusive. By 1965, thirty years after the origins of AA, it was clear he was concerned that the fellowship was moving in the wrong direction. He said the following at a Conference in New York:

Simply because we have convictions that work very well for us, it becomes quite easy to assume that we have all of the truth. Whenever this brand of arrogance develops we are sure to become aggressive. We demand agreement with us. We play God. This isn't good dogma. This is very bad dogma. It could be especially destructive for us of AA to indulge in this sort of thing.

You can read more about this talk here: [Responsibility is Our Theme](#).

Bill wanted inclusion! Later that year he had the Responsibility Declaration adopted at the International Convention of AA held at Maple Leaf Gardens in downtown Toronto: "I am responsible. When anyone, anywhere, reaches out for help, I want the hand of AA always to be there. And for that I am responsible."

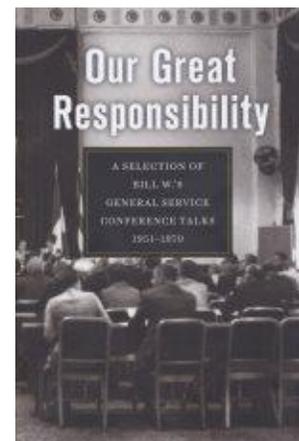
Inspired by this unconditioned affirmation of inclusion, agnostic AA groups invariably end their meetings with this declaration.

Now, let us note: within AA some real progress has indeed been made over the last year or two.

Just last month AA World Services published a book with sixteen of Bill's talks at Conferences (including his talk in 1965). It's called *Our Great Responsibility – A Selection of Bill W.'s General Service Conference Talks, 1951–1970*.

And what is "our great responsibility"? It's one word: inclusion. As an editor of the book puts it, "Bill focuses on inclusion and reminds us that we are all human and that we often see things in different ways."

Right on.

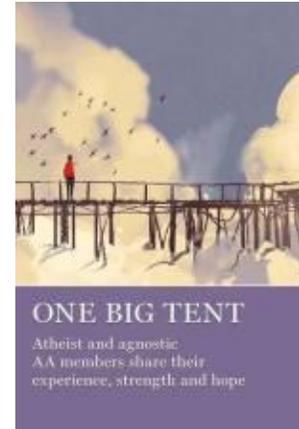


Another recent step forward: in April, 2018 the General Service Conference voted to adopt the British conference-approved pamphlet, “The ‘God’ Word: Agnostics and Atheists in AA”. The pamphlet isn’t perfect but there are some fine articles in it, three of which can be viewed here: [The “God” Word](#).

And, finally, another important inclusion effort was made last fall for atheists, agnostics and freethinkers in AA. That was the publication by AA Grapevine of the book *One Big Tent – Atheist and agnostic AA members share their experience, strength and hope*.

Beginning in 2014, an enormous amount of effort was made by AA Agnostica – and writers on the website – to get this book published. Here’s where it all began, with an article by life-j in September of 2014: [A Grapevine Book for Atheists and Agnostics in AA](#).

There are 43 articles by non-theists in the book. These are all articles that were published over the years on the Grapevine, the first in the book having been written in June of 1964. You can read a review and some history of the book written by Thomas B, another writer who worked hard to get the book published: [One Big Tent](#).



And what is this title, One Big Tent, all about? Well, inclusion, of course. While there has been some success in the pursuit of inclusion within AA, we are clearly not there yet. Alcoholics Anonymous needs to stop behaving like a 1930s Christian based organization. Only then will it be able to stop *pretending* to be for “anyone, anywhere who reaches out for help” and truly fulfill its great responsibility of inclusion.

Moving Forward

Our goal now is to keep AA Agnostica up and running for another two years, until mid-June 2021. It would then be ten years old!

And our purposes shall remain the same: to provide a voice for atheists, agnostics and freethinkers and to work for our inclusion in AA so that someday we are actually treated with respect.

This struggle for inclusion has been going on for a long, long time. In July 1976 two AA Literature sub-committee members were trying – unsuccessfully of course – to get “a pamphlet for the Agnostic and/or Atheist” published by AA World Services. Why? They wrote that such a pamphlet “is needed to assure non-believers that they are not merely deviants, but full, participating members in the AA Fellowship without qualification.”

AA clearly needs to grow up some more, much more, my friends. For example, there is no way in hell – please excuse the language – that AA can call itself “spiritual not religious” as long as its meetings end with the Lord’s Prayer.

And out of a sense of absolute necessity many of us – and that includes our AA Agnostica – are trying to encourage and help it do that.

And let me, as we near the end of this post, mention two other websites that have much the same purposes as AA Agnostica and have done some unbelievably good work over the years: [AA Beyond Belief](#) and [Rebellion Dogs Publishing](#).

So. Will we succeed?

Well, as our dear friend Joe C once put it: “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.”

Onward and upwards...