

Secularization and AA



By Dean W

In my recent essay, [Religion and AA](#), I used William E. Paden's book *Religious Worlds: A Comparative Study of Religion* (1988) to show that despite the common claim that AA is spiritual not religious, the AA fellowship is in fact a religious organization.

I also stated that the Big Book paradigm of recovery, that all real alcoholics need God to recover, is simply wrong. The large number of alcoholics who are getting sober and staying sober on a secular basis demonstrate this. The AA fellowship is experiencing increasing secularization, a phenomenon common to religious groups in modern times.

Paden describes four ways religious groups respond to secularization (p. 61ff.):

- Defending boundaries – the group fights against what it sees as corruption; this response is also known as fundamentalism;
- Accommodation – the group adapts its values to the secular, combining the religious and the secular into a new system;
- New groups – the old, traditional system is seen as so outdated that it must simply be replaced, and new groups are formed;
- Individualism – individuals define their own belief systems and practice their beliefs privately, without group participation.

AA has so far responded to secularization primarily by defending boundaries, or fundamentalism.

AA established this fundamentalism from the writing of the Big Book, if not before. Bill Wilson rejected pleas to write a minimally religious book and instead wrote a text that frequently invokes the Biblical God, arguing that God is the only answer for the real alcoholic. (William H. Schaberg, *Writing the Big Book: The Creation of AA*, 2019, p. 375-377)

The fellowship apparently codified this fundamentalism when in 1976 the AA General Service Conference voted that the Big Book's 12 Steps can only be changed by written approval of three-fourths of the groups. (*The AA Service Manual*, 2016-2018, p. S102) This makes the Steps as written in 1939 virtually unchangeable. (Arthur S, *Narrative Timeline of AA History*, 2014, p. 92)

I don't know the rationale behind this Conference action, but making the Steps unchangeable sounds like an ideal way to turn a suggested program of recovery into religious dogma. AA also demonstrated its fundamentalism by refusing for decades to publish any literature specifically addressed to atheist or agnostic members or potential members. The fellowship was clearly defending its religious boundaries, fighting the idea that recovery without God is possible.

I think the fellowship finally moved toward Paden's second response to secularization, accommodation, with the recent publication of "The God Word" pamphlet and the AA Grapevine book *One Big Tent*. This is a step in the right direction, but it is a very small step. Some would argue that AA Tradition, by allowing the formation of secular groups, is accommodation. I disagree. Accommodation, as Paden describes it, requires more than just saying, "You have a right to exist." *Accommodation requires the combining of secular ideas and practices with traditional religious ideas and practices into a new system*. Secular AA groups are achieving accommodation even as the overall fellowship lags far behind.

Secular groups combine elements of traditional AA such as a 12 step program, fellowship, and sponsorship with a nonreligious worldview. The principles behind the steps – identification, faith and hope, letting go, personal inventory, confession, restitution, etc. are applied in new, secular ways.

Secular AA is also (at least potentially) an example of the third response to secularization, the formation of new groups. Specialized groups are not new to AA, but secular groups are a new breed of specialized groups. AA Groups specifically for women, young people, professionals, LGBTQs, etc. have as far as I know always been built on the traditional AA religious foundation. Secular groups, on the other hand, reject that foundation. And by rejecting the traditional AA religious foundation, secular groups are an existential threat to fundamentalist AA and to traditional AA in general. We secularists threaten to change the very nature of AA. If traditional AA can't or won't accommodate secularism, then secular AA could evolve into a completely separate entity. Also, the formation of organizations such as SMART Recovery and LifeRing are probably examples of the new group response to secularization.

Individualism, the fourth response to secularization, is difficult to describe because the people taking this path have left AA, and people leave AA for a variety of reasons. At the first Alcoholic

Foundation meeting in 1938, the number of people listed as helped by AA in New York included “10 alcoholics recovered but out of touch”. (Arthur S, *Narrative Timeline of AA History*, 2014, p. 29)

In the AA group where I got sober over 30 years ago, one of the old timers told me that some alcoholics can leave AA after a while and be okay, and my observations bear this out. Some alcoholics seem to be able to internalize what they need from AA into their belief system and lifestyle and then move on, no longer needing the fellowship. It seems likely that many atheist or agnostic alcoholics have taken this path.

One of my early sponsors, who I would describe as a skeptic, apparently went this route. I’ve also considered it. As I became more agnostic and more outspoken about it and suffered more rejection in AA meetings for it, I seriously considered quitting AA. I know how to stay sober, and I have family support and a good psychologist. But eventually I found secular AA online and helped start an agnostic group in my town. Otherwise, I think I would have taken the path of individualism and would not be writing this essay.

I concluded my previous essay with several questions. Here are my answers to two of those:

Can traditional AAs and secular AAs work together to create groups and a fellowship that work for all newcomers, both those who need god and those who don’t?

Traditional AAs and secular AAs have much in common: both suffered the pains of alcoholism, both want to stay sober and help other alcoholics, and both believe in the power of fellowship. Is this enough common ground for us to eventually achieve accommodation, a new AA combining the religious and the secular?

How would we ever get there if we live in largely separate worlds? Am I willing to sit through all the religiosity of traditional meetings so that I can work with the traditional AA members there? Are traditional AA members willing to sit through the secular format and nonreligious discussions of my agnostic home group? I hear reports that traditional and secular AAs work well together in some places. That’s great, but why do we secular AAs need our own websites, meeting lists, conferences, etc.? Why aren’t these activities taking place within “official” AA? I don’t think traditional AAs and secular AAs will ever accomplish much together. Our worldviews are just too different.

Can AA become a god-neutral or god-optional fellowship?

God-neutral AA groups are certainly possible. We have one group in my town that appears god-neutral. The format is nonreligious but not specifically agnostic or secular. It’s a discussion meeting and seems open to practically any topic, including traditional/religious AA topics. All worldviews are respected, and religious members and nonreligious members appear to interact with little or no serious conflict. I imagine there are similar groups here and there, but I suspect these groups are pretty rare.

To change the nature of the overall fellowship there would probably have to be enough of these groups (and secular groups) involved in the AA service structure to supply a significant number of delegates to the General Service Conference. This seems possible, but not likely to happen anytime soon. And the AA fellowship becoming god-neutral would probably also require structural change, at least regarding Tradition Two. As long as AA's ultimate authority is God, I think AA will always be a religious organization. Changing a Tradition, like changing the Steps, requires approval of three-fourths of the groups, a virtual impossibility. So I don't think AA can become god-neutral. AA was founded and structured as a religious organization, and its entire history is religious. I don't see that changing.

As I close this essay, let's remember that almost all religious groups, if they survive long enough, experience a schism. We have no reason to believe AA is an exception to that rule. If traditional AA cannot or will not accommodate secular AA, then the two factions could eventually split into two separate fellowships – religious and secular. The two factions are based on such different worldviews and have so little interaction that the split may already be starting. And maybe a split would be for the best. Maybe traditional AA should remain true to its fundamentalist religious nature, and maybe secular AA should simply leave the religious fold and establish its independence.

In my first essay I described visiting my previous, traditional AA home group and how unpleasant that experience was. I felt I didn't belong there anymore. Maybe I don't, and maybe I never will.

Dean W went to his first AA meeting around 1980, and has been clean and sober since 1988. He got sober in a very conservative AA environment – lots of Big Book and Twelve and Twelve meetings, along with the Joe and Charley Big Book seminar tapes. For about 25 years he was a traditional, God-oriented AA member; a believer, if only a nominal and often skeptical one. Then, over a period of about five years he had another “spiritual awakening” and became an agnostic. In June 2018 Dean helped start the We Agnostics group in Elkhart, Indiana. This is now his home group, though he occasionally still attends traditional AA meetings. He is something of a jack of all trades – he's worked as a warehouse foreperson, an autoworker, a tool and die maker, and a college adjunct instructor, among other things. Dean presently works as a high school substitute teacher.

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