

An AA Pamphlet for Agnostics – The 1980s



Fifty Chosen Articles:

Number Ten.

Posted on AA Agnostica in November 2013.

Conference Approved Literature.

"The greatest danger facing AA today (is)... prohibiting non-Conference approved literature, i.e., 'banning books'."

*The Manager of the AA General Service Office (GSO),
Bob Pearson, 35 years ago. [AA's Greatest Danger - Rigidity.](#)*

In the last three and a half decades, nothing has changed. Things have gotten worse. The only books available at the GSO, Intergroups, Central Offices and at the literature tables at traditional AA meetings are "conference approved". Everything else is indeed banned.

And why is that? Because the only literature that is conference approved is published by the GSO and that's precisely where they get their profits. In fact, in 2019 the GSO made \$9,358,751 from literature sales.

Thus "conference approved". And the "banning" of everything else, no matter how helpful it might be for those in recovery.

Shame on the GSO.

By Roger C.

In October 1981, Ed S. wrote to the AA trustees' Literature Committee and asked that the idea of preparing and publishing a "Conference-approved" pamphlet for agnostics and atheists in the fellowship be reconsidered.

You see, he had tried to get such a pamphlet once before, and the idea had been rejected.

In the 1970s Ed had been a trustee – one of AA's 21 policy and financial administrators – and a member of a sub-committee of the Literature Committee.

He and Paula C. – the other member of the subcommittee – had recommended that AA compile and write "a pamphlet for the Agnostic and/or Atheist." In a report presented to the full Literature committee in July, 1976, 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."

At first, the Literature Committee was gung ho to proceed. In August it asked for more detail in a revised report that it would present to the General Service Conference, which would make the final decision.

(The Conference meets for a week once a year, every spring. It consists of delegates from 93 Conference areas in North America, the trustees of the General Service Board, and other directors and AA staff. It functions as the group conscience of the fellowship. All official AA literature must be "Conference-approved.")

Astonishingly, however, the Committee did a dramatic about face and in October of 1976 trashed the idea and "decided not to ask the 1977 Conference Literature Committee to consider a pamphlet for agnostics/atheists."

The reason for that reversal has never been made public.

Apparently Ed was not the kind of person who gives up simply because of adversity. His letter in October of 1981 read, in part:

Even though it would not be a best seller, could we have a pamphlet written by an agnostic or atheist for those who have trouble believing? Possible title: "Come Not to Believe".

In January 1982 "the committee declined to recommend the publication of a pamphlet intended for agnostics or atheists who have trouble believing."

Again, no reason was offered.

* * *

The idea of a pamphlet for those “who have trouble believing” finally made it to the General Service Conference in the spring of 1989.

At least some of the interest in such a pamphlet was generated by an article in the AA Grapevine in October of 1987 called: [Is There Room Enough in AA?](#) In the article, J. L. from Oakland, California writes about how, as an atheist with many years of sobriety, he feels muzzled in the rooms of AA:

I hear so little from atheists in AA because those of us who do not believe in God keep quiet about it. I have done so partly out of timidity and partly to avoid the comment that the admission of atheism frequently brings: that I will someday believe or I will get drunk.

Does that sound familiar to anyone? For more on this you can read [The “Don’t Tell” Policy in AA.](#)

At any rate, the article prompted a letter from Jack M. to the General Service Office dated February 1, 1989.

At the time Jack had some thirteen years of sobriety in AA, and one of his comments picks up on the theme of the Grapevine article:

I can’t understand why (believers) hardly ever tire of trying to convince or persuade non-believers to change, particularly in AA which is a program of attraction, because the thought of trying to persuade a believer to change never even enters my mind.

He goes on to say:

There just doesn’t seem to be any AA General Service Conference-approved literature written specifically for the non-believer. Is such a project under way? ...A collection of encouraging words would not have to be adversarial, antagonistic, cogent, defensive, patronizing or persuasive. A foreword could even be included which would explain the apparent conflict, at least to some newcomers, between the statement in our preamble regarding AA not being allied with any sect, denomination, organization or institution and the fact that we all rise... and recite the prayer beginning Our Father at the close of each meeting. The foreword could also contain a clear statement that belief in a higher power is not at any time a requirement for membership or for getting and staying sober.

Another letter had also been written to the General Service Office in 1989 and that one was by Tom M. of Florida.

He writes of the many atheists who have gotten and stayed sober within the rooms of AA. “We believe,” he says, “that we have accumulated experiences that can give hope, strength, and comfort to newly sober people in AA who are of the agnostic or atheistic persuasion.”

He goes on to say:

To declare your agnosticism or atheism at many meetings (at least in this part of the country) brings upon oneself knowing stares and sometimes repudiation from someone in the group. Now, I personally don't have this problem anymore. My longevity in sobriety is given respect, but I am still thought of as a paradox or oddball. I can handle that just fine, now. The question that bothers me, is that 'Can a newly sober agnostic or atheist handle being treated as an oddball?' Many cannot."

These letters, and others, were duly considered by the trustees' Literature Committee which made a recommendation "for some sort of spiritual literature in response to requests from atheists and agnostics."

Not a chance.

The spring 1989 General Service Conference considered the request. And it blew the idea right out of the water.

It "did not see a sufficient need to take action."

This post is based entirely on the document [History – Proposals to Create a Pamphlet for the Non-Believer / Agnostic / Atheist Alcoholic](#).
