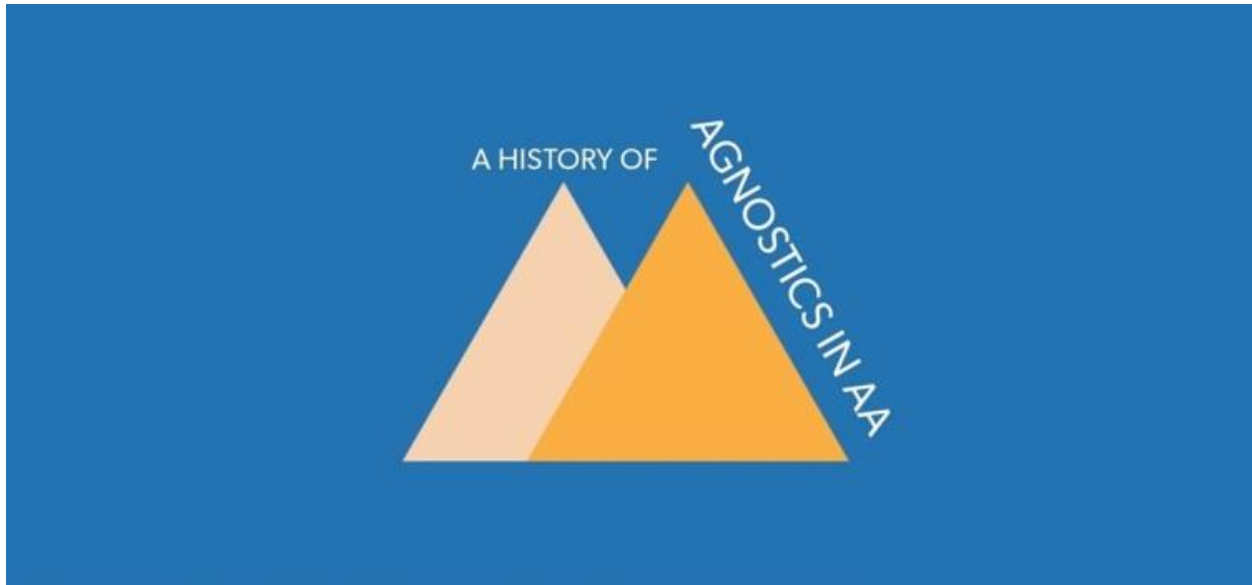


An Agnostic in AA



*Fifty Chosen Articles:
Number Thirty-Six.
Originally posted in April 2017.*

The struggle with “traditional” AA.

By Roger C

I went to my first AA meeting when I was in rehab back in 2010. It was a speaker meeting and there was a fellow on stage who talked about how he owed his sobriety to “the Guy in the sky”.

I thought, “Are you kidding me?” But, of course he wasn’t. I was soon to discover that there was a lot of God talk at AA meetings. That is the first thing that bothers we agnostics and atheists in AA.

I should say that I am not speaking for all agnostics and atheists in AA. Nobody can do that. But as the editor of the website AA Agnostica and having been heavily involved in secular AA meetings, I am in contact with many agnostic members and know that many of them feel and react much the same as I do.

But back to the God talk: the God that is talked about at meetings is often a Christian God, an anthropomorphic (created in man's image – "Father", "He" or "Him") and interventionist (who can solve a problem with alcohol "if He were sought") supernatural being.

That doesn't work for me or other atheist alcoholics.

Most of us believe that what works in AA to keep us sober are two things: first, tapping an "inner resource" (see Appendix II of the Big Book) that makes us strive to be sober, and better, human beings. And, second, the fellowship. Going to an AA meeting and talking with others who understand the problem of alcoholism is a wonderful form of group therapy. The support of others (Step 12) plays a key part in our recovery, according to our more secular AA members, not a God.

The God talk might even be tolerable except for one thing and that is our second problem: we agnostics in AA are often not allowed to be honest at "traditional" AA meetings and even suggest that we personally don't believe in this God. There is apparently an unofficial policy in Alcoholics Anonymous for non-believers at AA meetings that might well be called: "Don't Tell".

And if you do talk about your lack of belief, you will often be subjected to a rebuttal, or an outright attack. It is one place at an AA meeting where crosstalk will sometimes happen. Or you will be confronted after the meeting. When that first happened to me I was stunned. You see, I have a Masters degree and spent years at McGill University working on my doctorate in Religious Studies. I taught ordinands (women and men studying to be church ministers). I was the "resident atheist" at the Faculty of Religious Studies and was treated with genuine respect. Not so much in AA. Many agnostics and atheists are treated with disrespect in AA, if not outright contempt.

That's a real problem.

And the last, the third problem, that many of us experience in AA are meetings that end with the Lord's Prayer. To say that AA is "spiritual not religious" and then recite the Lord's Prayer, well, that just doesn't wash. The Lord's Prayer is found in the New Testament in the Gospel of Matthew (6:5-13) with a shorter version in the Gospel of Luke (11:1-4). It was said to have been taught by Jesus to his disciples and is considered the essential summary of the gospels, of the religion of Christianity.

Because it discriminates against those with other beliefs or with no religious beliefs at all, the Lord's Prayer was eliminated from public schools by the Supreme Court in the United States in 1962. And in 1988, 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 thus constitutes a violation of the freedom of conscience and religion provisions in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. That was the end of the Lord's Prayer in public schools in Canada.

Agnostics and atheists believe that the Lord's Prayer does not belong at AA meetings. It's fine at a religious church meeting but to say that AA is "spiritual but not religious" and then end a meeting with the Lord's Prayer is a real contradiction.

After getting out of rehab, I went to a lot of AA meetings. And it got to the point where I just couldn't stand them. Too much of the "God bit". I realized I could no longer go to them and I was terrified I would start drinking again.

But, almost accidentally, I went one Saturday to my first ever agnostic AA meeting: Beyond Belief, in Toronto. It was, for me, a superb meeting.

When I got out I threw my hands up in the air and I shouted, "I'm saved!"

I have been going to secular AA meetings ever since. There was only that one meeting for non-believers in AA in Canada in the summer of 2010, when I went to Beyond Belief. Today there are more than twenty-five in five provinces. These secular meetings are now growing with great momentum.

These secular AA meetings – without any doubt at all – have been the main source of my sobriety. I know and feel that "I am not alone" and that I am free to express any doubts or disbeliefs I may have and that I can be totally honest.

For me, as for many other agnostics in AA, it's the fellowship that makes the difference. It's the frequent "remember when" stories that help to keep me from going back. It's learning so much from others about how they are able to deal with their alcoholism and to maintain their sobriety, truly, "one day at a time". It's the understanding, caring and support of the people at these AA meetings. Back in rehab, and in my early days and months of recovery, the word "gratitude" meant nothing to me at all.

Today I experience it every single day.

AA is meant to be here for all who reach out for help. We are a "kinship of universal suffering" as Bill Wilson put it and we need to let everyone who attends an AA meeting know and feel that they are welcome, regardless of belief or lack of belief.
