

# Religion Free AA – Is It Possible?



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*“AA was born as a religious entity.”*

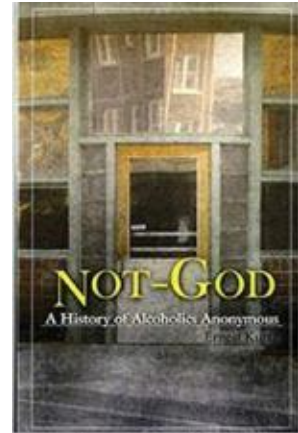
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***By John B***

My answer to the question is no, and the purpose of this essay is to explain why I believe AA will remain saturated with religion. The claim that AA is not religious is delusional. Some may think delusional is a bit too harsh, but common usage of the word simply implies the harboring of a false belief or impression. Just how strong a grip does religion have on AA? Let’s start at the beginning.

AA was born as a religious entity. I make that statement without equivocation based on two sources: forty years of intensive AA involvement in N.E. Indiana and North Georgia, combined with Ernest Kurtz’s description of AA in his book, *Not God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous*. Kurtz studied the History of American Civilization at Harvard, and the book was his doctoral dissertation.

In the chapter, The Context of Religious Ideas, he looks at AA from within the parameters of classical American religious ideas and reaches this conclusion: "...the fundamental impulse revealed by and lived out within Alcoholics Anonymous will be found to be that of a uniquely American expression of Evangelical Pietism." (*Not-God*, p. 182) Let's break that down. Evangelical – the Protestant belief in salvation by grace alone, through faith in an atonement delivered by Jesus's atonement. (Wikipedia) Pietism – emphasis on individual piety, and living a vigorous Christian life. (Wikipedia) In that chapter Kurtz gives Wilson credit for his efforts to avoid religiosity, and acknowledges that AA defines itself as spiritual not religious, but his final judgment tells us that AA is 'uniquely' religious.

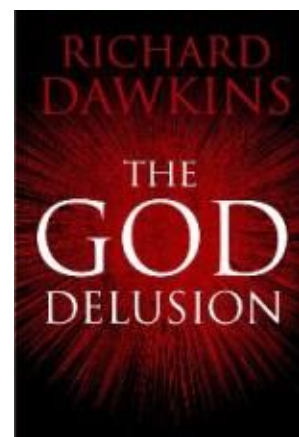


I have observed nothing in my forty years of AA attendance that would serve to refute Mr. Kurtz. One might not agree with the type of religion Kurtz assigns AA, but the 85 years of AA history clearly reveals a "lived out" religious impulse.

Why did that happen? Historians have documented the fact that there have been secular, atheist, agnostic influences within AA from its earliest days, but these alternatives haven't gained enough traction to alter the course of AA, and presently there is nothing to indicate that we non-believers are anywhere near achieving the critical mass necessary to push official AA in our direction.

Some of the postings and replies on AA Agnostica made it abundantly clear that there is a lot of frustration, even some hostility, because of this apparent inertia on the part of AA. I'm part of the frustration, but I firmly believe that for me to think the God based orientation of autonomous AA meetings (which to many of us is in itself a manifestation of religion) will somehow disappear, would be as equally delusional as the claim that AA is not religious. AA Agnostica has posted some thoughtful arguments advocating change, but I think the problem is more complex than these hopeful reformers realize. Some aspects of human nature, combined with cultural influences, serve as powerful impediments to these frequently called for changes.

Even if AA was born as a uniquely religious entity, as asserted by Kurtz, that fails to explain why, given the fact that every AA group is autonomous, the religious factions have remained dominant. In his book, *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins offers some insights that may help to answer that question; answers heavily invested in the Darwinian theory of evolution. Dawkins is an internationally known evolutionary biologist and an equally known outspoken atheist. Here is a quote that forcefully describe his contempt for religion: "Though the details differ across the world, no known culture lacks some version of the time consuming, hostility provoking rituals, the anti-factual, counter-productive fantasies of religion." (*God Delusion*, p. 166)



This atheist sees religion as useless, even destructive. How has it survived and become so pervasive? The simple fact that religion has survived, according to the Charles Darwin's theory, is because it has contributed something to the survival of our species.

If we go back a few hundred thousand years what primitive trait might we find, that when genetically passed on, would make humans receptive to religion? Dawkins sorts through a wide array of possibilities, evaluates them all and settles on one. "My specific hypothesis is about children." (*God Delusion*, p. 174) Throughout the millennia our species has survived on the cumulative experiences of previous generations and passed that information on to the next generation – our children. This serves to reduce fatal mistakes by the young. Kids need to know that snakes and alligators might be dangerous. More importantly, the continuation of this process over thousands of generations contributed to the evolutionary development of a newborn's brain receptive to believe what is told to them by elders.

I find it impossible to argue with that principle of evolution because it is so apparent to all of us. Easter bunny, tooth fairy, Santa. For a few years they believe pretty much anything we tell them. The human brain is obviously receptive to information that enhances survival, an attribute that has value in its own right. Seven billion or so of us wandering around on planet earth strongly supports that hypothesis. What's not so obvious is Dawkins contention that a human receptiveness to religion piggy-backed its way into our brain.

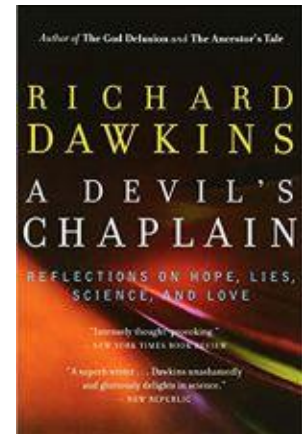
That claim may be "a leap too far" for many, but I find it easy to accept for at least one simple reason. World estimates indicate that between five and six billion humans, who live in widely differing cultures, have chosen to affiliate with one of the world's many religions. Secularists, atheists, and agnostics are estimated to be about one billion.

Dawkins explains this huge disparity this way: "The religious behavior may be a misfiring, an unfortunate by-product of an underlying psychological propensity which in other circumstances is, or once was, useful." (*God Delusion*, p. 174)

That's the evolutionary biology take on this issue of the acceptance of religion. We see religion was allowed entry into the arena of life without having to buy a ticket.

It turns out that biologists are not alone, they have received some backing from the field of evolutionary psychology. Here's Robert Wright from his book, *The Moral Animal: Why We Are the Way We Are*. "People tend to believe things that are in their evolutionarily ingrained interest." (*The Moral Animal*, p. 365) Neither of these fields of studies tells us when religion slipped into the human brain and utilized the already developed receptivity. I don't find that omission compelling, the point is religion got in, and it's still there.

We have now evolved far beyond our primeval circumstances, but information is still passed on to the young by our elders, and those young minds absorb it. Normal maturation leads us out of the tooth fairy stage and we begin to learn on our own, ask questions and use our reason to find answers. Some of us are able to use reason to shove religion aside, while most end up influenced by some form of religious impulse. Here I bring in Mr. Dawkins again. In his book, *A Devil's Chaplain*, he warns us that in spite of our power of reason, this receptive brain of ours far too often relies on three bad reasons to attach validity to things we are told. Those reasons are tradition, authority, and revelation. It seems to me that all three of these have helped to make AA a self-perpetuating religious institution.



Maybe the argument against the religiosity of AA is misdirected; maybe the real confrontation is with human nature and the culture at large. To change AA will require an alternative as powerful and appealing as the current belief in God as the primary source for successful recovery. What language can be used? What cluster of words can be presented as a powerful frame? What core values that motivate agnosticism, atheism, or humanism can be defined and presented in ways that would motivate alcoholics to buy into those values?

Who has the time, the talent, and the commitment to make this happen? I don't have the answers! Do you?

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*John is an eighty-five year old sober alcoholic with over 35 years of continuous sobriety. Married to Helen for 55 years; three kids in their 50's. Spent 17 years teaching and coaching at the high school level in Indiana and Illinois. Owned and operated a bar and restaurant for 13 years which led to the acceleration of his alcoholism, which led to treatment, and eventually led to a career as an addiction counselor. Retired in 2001 from the Marion, In. V.A. Served as office manager for a major AA intergroup office in N.E. In. for six and a half years. Passionate about family, recovery, basketball, and the St. Louis Cardinals. Reads 20 to 25 books a year, and three or four quality periodicals on a regular basis; mostly about politics, economics, science, history: about anything going on in the world that strikes his curiosity.*

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