Poland is considered to be a religious, Catholic country. Nevertheless, the nonreligious movement in AA is growing.

By Witek D.

A few years ago, at the AA Convention in Texas, I talked to a lady from New York, who was a member of the GSO staff. She knew about the rapid growth of AA in Poland (we have 2700 groups) and told me that, in her opinion, it was because we Polish people are believers. Believers in a religious sense.

I was surprised. Indeed, Poland is considered to be a religious, Catholic country, I said, but AA hasn’t got that religious connection. I was surprised, but now I know she was right. I clearly see that Polish AA is linked with religion, rather not officially but practically.

I’m writing “rather not officially” because some groups quite openly had organized workshops, retreats and pilgrimages at “holy” places for years. These very popular events
usually connected with attendance in Catholic masses. They are not run by our GSO, but do a lot of harm to AA’s image.

What’s more, I’m afraid, a quite new strong wave of religiosity is rolling through Polish AA now.

Some claim it’s not religion, it’s spirituality because we don’t talk about a particular God and our He or She is not obligatorily associated with the Church. But it’s a whitewash. Religion is a faith in God who intervenes in people’s lives, heals them or not, depending on His will, and to whom one has to pray. What we have in a large part of our AA is “theism”: non-institutional religion, not related to a specific denomination. But it’s still religion.

The vast majority of AA members (and I didn’t pay attention to this early on) believe that God recovered them from alcoholism and they speak about it at every meeting. Sometimes they say that they don’t manage their own lives any longer but have turned themselves over to the care of God. What does this mean? It’s a declaration of deep religious faith.

This kind of faith is well beyond my agnostic approach. I can accept the idea of turning my life over to the care of a higher power, however we understand it, but I understand that I control my own mind and that managing my life on a day-to-day basis is still my responsibility.

I often wonder how a newcomer feels when he or she hears in the Preamble at the beginning of the meeting that AA is not religious and nevertheless later on hears from most of the speakers that they have been saved by a personal God who has intervened in their lives. Probably some of them suspect that we are simply not being honest.

Here’s another example from a meeting. A young man, three years in AA, said: “I still have various fears, despite the program and my sponsor I still worry about my family, work, health ...” Someone in the room raised his hand and suggested: “Apparently your contact with God is too weak. Correct your relations with your Higher Power and all fears will pass”.

Everyone nodded with agreement with how sensibly he had advised, but it made me feel bad. I wondered: Where am I, what am I doing here, what do I have in common with these religious people? What I felt was rather low spirits and embarrassment, and absolutely not an identification.
It’s true that no one rejects atheists at a regular meeting but also no one cares if we feel good. Quite often we don’t. We feel instructed, discriminated against, sometimes scared and offended. For example, one AA group translated and widely propagated “Gresham’s Law and AA” which offends unbelievers, calling them cheats who dissolve AA’s program.

So far there are no secular AA meetings in Poland but we atheists and agnostics AA members definitely need them. We deserve this sense of community in our recovery, feeling connected, not strange and awkward, rather than like a person who, so far, doesn’t believe but in a while... who knows?

We all know this saying: “Fake it until you make it”. I’ve been sober for 23 years, how much longer should I fake it?

After articles I got from AA Agnostica and then translated and sent to friends I received many interesting responses: “Thank you for these important words, wonderful text, it’s good to know I’m not alone...” “At some meetings I don’t dare say I’m an atheist and then I feel like a fraud...” “Once when I said I was an agnostic I heard that there was no sobriety without God and I that didn’t know anything about spirituality...”

It was a wonderful feeling that I experienced it at the International Conference of Secular AA (ICSAA) in Toronto, to sit among people who prove by their attendance that it’s possible to get and stay sober without faith in a supernatural being. And to think: that’s what I have done too.

Some people I spoke to about secular AA meetings said it was a bad idea, a threat to our unity. Really? American and Canadian experiences show something different. On the contrary, secular meetings attract to the fellowship people who wouldn’t come to AA under any other circumstances.

And meetings for women, priests, policemen? They are like that too, not liked by everyone, but apparently, these people need them. For the same reason: it’s about identity and a sense of community. It is important that these, let’s say, special meetings would be not closed, so that everyone who needs help can attend. And a second thing: they shouldn’t be pushed out of AA, for example by being refused registration on Intergroup lists.

We all would like to have a choice, go once to one group, the second time to another. Also we Polish atheists and agnostics appreciate the strength of AA and want to be a part of this wonderful fellowship. We don’t want, not in the least, to split AA’s unity. We are the same – alcoholics – but we only understand in a different way the concept of a “higher
power”. For us, it can be the wisdom of other alcoholics and/or ethical rules given us by our ancestry.

And let’s remember Bill’s W words:

...this was the great contribution of our atheists and agnostics. They had widened our gateway so that all who suffer may pass through, regardless of their belief or lack of belief.

Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age, Page 167, 1957

Witek D. is 63 years old and has been sober since December 27, 1994. He has been living in a small town in the middle of Poland where he attends his home group, “Compas”, and the online group AAinAA.

Active in AA service at all levels, in the years 2009-2013 he was a member of the Polish Board of Trustees. Witek openly talks about his agnostic views; just like Albert Einstein, he considers “…the idea of a personal God is a childlike one... which cannot be taken seriously”.

To visit the Polish secular AA website, click on the image.

He is concerned with the fate of agnostics and atheists in AA and translates into Polish some articles from AA Agnostica and sends them to friends with similar concerns. Witek attended the last International Conference of Secular AA in Toronto.

Currently (2022) in Poland, there are three agnostic groups: the oldest, AAinAA, meets online and two others meet in-person. The nonreligious movement in Polish AA is slowly growing.

To visit the Polish secular AA website, click here: https://aawaa.pl/.