

## Does religion belong at AA? Fight over 'God' splits Toronto AA groups

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It uses "fellowship" to help chronic drinkers quit the bottle. But there is little fellowship in a schism that splintered the Alcoholics Anonymous umbrella group in the GTA this week.

At issue is this question: Do alcoholics need God?

On Tuesday, Toronto's two secular AA groups, known as Beyond Belief and We Agnostics, were removed or "delisted" from the roster of local meetings. They've disappeared from the Toronto AA website and will not be in the next printed edition of the Toronto directory.

The dispute started when Beyond Belief posted an adapted version of AA's hallowed "Twelve Steps" on the Toronto website. They removed the word "God" from the steps, which are used as a kind of road map to help drinkers achieve sobriety.

“They took issue with a public display of secular AA,” says Joe C., who founded Beyond Belief, Toronto’s first agnostic AA group, 18 months ago. (In keeping with AA’s tradition of anonymity, members are identified by first names only.)

It proved popular enough that a second group started up last fall; it took its name from a chapter in the AA bible entitled Alcoholics Anonymous, commonly known as the Big Book. The group, We Agnostics, had only recently completed the paperwork to be part of AA before being booted out.

“What is unusual is that this didn’t happen in some backwater, but that it happened in a liberal, democratic, pluralistic place like Toronto,” says Joe.

The name of God appears four times in the Twelve Steps and echoes the period in which they were written — the 1930s. It invites those seeking sobriety to turn themselves over to God, who will remove their “defects of character.” They go on to speak of God’s will for the recovering alcoholic.

“They (the altered Twelve Steps) are not our Twelve Steps,” says an AA member who was at Tuesday’s meeting of the coordinating body known as the Greater Toronto Area Intergroup. “They’ve changed them to their own personal needs. They should never have been listed in the first place.”

He says that in the early days of AA, meetings ended with the Lord’s Prayer. “That has obviously stopped in all but hard-core groups. We welcome people with open arms. In our group we still say the Lord’s Prayer. One guy was uncomfortable with that. I told him to just step back when we pray. He does. He’s doing what he needs to do for him.”

The issue of AA’s use of God has come up frequently over the past 50 years. For the most part, the organization — which claims 113,000 groups around the world — permits other agencies to imitate its program, but not to call themselves Alcoholics Anonymous.

Other secular organizations, including Save our Selves (or Secular Organizations for Sobriety), offer addiction help similar to AA. But with some 100,000 members in 2005, SOS is far less popular than AA, which reports a membership of about two million. In Toronto alone, there are 500 AA meetings a week.

“This is not the first we’ve gone up against bigotry,” says Larry of We Agnostics. “This has been an ongoing struggle in North America.”

One man wept in dismay over the delisting at Beyond Belief’s Thursday night meeting at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education on Bloor Street West. Thirty-two people, mostly men, sat at desks in a classroom.

“I do believe in God,” he said after the meeting. “But you don’t need to believe in God to recover and I don’t think it’s appropriate at AA.”

The meeting opened with a statement that said, in keeping with AA tradition, the group did not endorse or oppose either religious belief or atheism. “Our only wish is to ensure suffering alcoholics that they can find sobriety in AA without having to accept anyone else’s beliefs, or having to deny their own.”

“I’ve tried AA meetings and I couldn’t get past the influence of right-wing Christianity,” said a big, Liam Neeson look-alike.

“Last night I went to a meeting and it was like a sermon again,” he told the group. “I felt I should quit.

“But someone told me, ‘hey, go downtown, there’s an atheist/agnostic meeting.’ So I thought I thought I’d give AA one last chance and I came here.”

There’s a moment’s pause.

“Welcome,” the group said.

One of the members, Roger, took issue with AA’s concept of the “God of your understanding.”

“First, there is a gender problem (several of the steps refer to Him). But more importantly, a creator God with a personal interest in me doesn’t fit well with my understanding of how the cosmos works.”

In January, Rev. Pete Watters, 82, and a Catholic priest, celebrated 50 years of sobriety with AA. Several thousand came to an Oakville union hall to celebrate his anniversary.

He knew the roots of the movement well and travelled for seven years with the late Bill Wilson, the charismatic co-founder of AA and author of the Twelve Steps.

In 1961, Wilson, whose early thinking on AA was influenced by the British evangelical Oxford Group, addressed the problems faced by non-believers. He opened the tent to all, but wrote that doubters could eventually take the first “easy” step into “the realm of faith.”

“People and agencies can help,” Watters says, “but the only one who can restore that person to permanent sobriety is God. But that’s the God of your understanding — that can be anything you want.”

In AA God can be interpreted as an acronym for “good, orderly, direction,” or as something that can be found in nature, a set of ethical principles, or even in the courage of fellow AA members.

But it’s essential to turn yourself over to something or someone other, says Watters. “If you don’t believe in any power greater than yourself, you are on your own.”

A woman member of a group that adheres to the traditional Twelve Steps puts it this way: “You need to believe in something higher than yourself. Our self got us drunk.”

Different steps

**Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous that cite God:**

2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, as we understood Him, prayer only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.

**Beyond Belief's adapted Twelve Steps:**

2. Came to accept and to understand that we needed strengths beyond our awareness and resources to restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of the AA program.
5. Admitted to ourselves without reservation, and to another human being, the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were ready to accept help in letting go of all our defects of character.
7. Humbly sought to have our shortcomings removed.
11. Sought through mindful inquiry and meditation to improve our spiritual awareness, seeking only for knowledge of our rightful path in life and the power to carry that out.