

# A History of Secularism in AA

*This talk was delivered by Roger C., the manager of the website AA Agnostica, at a Conference for secularists in AA held in Olympia, Washington, on January 16, 2016.*

*The Conference was called Widening the Gateway.*

**By Roger C.**

## **Introduction**

I am really pleased to be here today. The opportunity to come here – to escape from Toronto and arrive in Vancouver where I have some dear friends and some family members – is just spectacular for me.

I am going to talk about secularism in AA and where that started for me was when the two groups in Toronto on May 31, 2011, were booted out of Intergroup. They were booted off of the meeting list and they were booted out of Intergroup and it was an extraordinarily traumatic moment for those of us in those two groups.

One of the first things we decided to do was start a website, AA Toronto Agnostics, so that people would continue to know that these agnostic meetings existed and that they were welcome to attend them.

Having done that, as I say it was the end of May 2011, I decided to write a book or an essay called [A History of Agnostic Groups in AA](#). I thought, well, this is going to be easy, we have the Internet today, I am going to do a few google searches and by the time the weekend is over I am going to have written this book. It was shocking to me that there was simply no information out there and it eventually took me about six months to put the thing together and it was the beginning of my understanding of AA.

I was new to the fellowship at the time. I had about a year of sobriety, and I didn't know anything about it and it was this project that introduced me to Alcoholics Anonymous and its history.

In googling one of the first people, I ran across was Bill White and he was so helpful. And he said, you should contact Ernie Kurtz. And I thought, "Who is Ernie Kurtz?" And I got a hold of Ernie and he was so supportive. Ernie is, of course, the author of *Not-God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous*, which is such an important book. But he hadn't mentioned anything about agnostics in AA in his book and he was very excited about the fact that I had undertaken this project and tried to be as supportive as possible. It was interesting because I also had huge support from the General Service Office of Alcoholics Anonymous. Michelle Mirza is the chief archivist and she did everything she could to help me but there was no information in the archives about agnostic groups.

So I began to work on it. I began to work on the project. It was a lot of work. I eventually completed it and Ernie loved it. I am going to quote him here and it's partly ego that is causing me to do this but Ernie said: "I appreciate your work, and I am sure many others will. I also hope, with you, that this information will help atheists and agnostics in other, smaller places to be able to find comfort in AA... The fellowship owes you a debt of gratitude, though it may take time for them to realize that." I want you to know that it's been about five years and they still have not expressed their profound appreciation for "A History of Agnostic Groups in AA".

## Origins of AA

I want to start at the beginning because from the very beginning agnostics and atheists were a part of AA. Some of the first were people like Hank Parkhurst and Jim Burwell and Jim was part of the first of the two groups of AA. He was a member of the group in New York that met at Bill Wilson's house and he was anti-religious in a ferocious kind of way. So much so that a lot of members of his group were hoping he would either get drunk or go away. Over the years he was a very important part of AA and started a number of groups and meetings across the United States always remaining, if you will, faithful to his lack of faith.

In 1939 there was a big battle over *Alcoholics Anonymous*, the book, and particularly all of the references to God. I write about it in *The Little Book*. I put a little essay in there called [The Origins of the 12 Steps](#) because I wanted to describe the battle that occurred. It was all about the God part in the book, in the Steps, and because of people like Jim Burwell changes were made to the Steps. The idea of "God" was changed to "God as you understand Him". That was Jim Burwell.

Bill Wilson at one point afterwards, after the Steps were changed, said "This was the great contributions of our atheists and agnostics. They had widened our gateway so that all who suffer might pass through, regardless of their belief or lack of belief." So if any of you were wondering why this Conference is called "Widening the Gateway" that's where the name comes from.

Bill was quite excited about that. He thought the solution had been found and he went on to say that it was a "ten strike", this change to the Steps. Obviously a reference to bowling and in *The Little Book* I write, "In hindsight, it was certainly not a 'ten-strike'. The ball didn't end up in the gutter but it turned out instead to be more of a 'split' rather than a 'ten-strike', with pins on both sides, and far apart."

You know, Bill actually understood over time that there was a problem. In "The Dilemma of No Faith", which he wrote in 1961 in the *Grapevine* – 1961, so we are talking twenty years after writing the Big Book, and it's actually one of the more dramatic things he ever said, I think – he said "In AA's first years I all but ruined the whole undertaking... God as I understood Him had to be for everybody. Sometimes my aggression was subtle and sometimes it was crude. But either way it was damaging – perhaps fatally so – to numbers of non-believers."

A few years later, in 1965, at a General Service Conference in New York, Bill did an inventory of AA's history, "the better to reveal the areas in which we can improve ourselves". I heard about this speech and so I sent an email to Michelle Mirza at the GSO and asked for a copy of it. But there is no written copy of this speech so she very kindly went to the trustees and they sent me a CD of it. I wrote an article about called [Responsibility is Our Theme](#) which is on AA Agnostica. It's one of my favourites because of the things Bill says in that article and I am going to quote a few of them.

Bill talked about the hundreds of thousands of men and women who had come into AA over the previous 35 years and left. "Newcomers are approaching us at the rate of tens of thousands yearly. They represent almost every belief and attitude imaginable. We have atheists and agnostics," he said. "We have people of nearly every race, culture and religion."

And then he asked this question: "How much and how often did we fail them?"

Finally towards the end of his talk, Bill got to the heart of his message of responsibility. And I am going to quote:

*In AA we are supposed to be bound together in the kinship of a universal suffering. Therefore the full liberty to practice any creed or principle or therapy should be a first consideration. Hence let us not pressure anyone with individual or even collective views. Let us instead accord to each other the respect that is due to every human being as he tries to make his way towards the light. Let us always try to be inclusive rather than exclusive. Let us remember that each alcoholic among us is a member of AA, so long as he or she so declares.*

I'm running into all of this literature as I am writing "A History of Agnostic Groups in AA" after two groups were booted out of Intergroup in Toronto. And what I am trying to say is that secularism in AA is not a new issue nor is it an outside issue. Inclusivity – being bound together in the kinship of a universal suffering – is at the heart, the very core of our fellowship. It has to be at the very top of our priorities and not an afterthought. AA is an umbrella. When I first, by the way – I do go on, I apologize – when I first saw the flyer for this Conference and saw the title, Widening the Gateway, and read down through the agenda, I thought "I gotta be there!" Because to me this is pure AA. Reaching out to other human beings is, if you will excuse the expression, the very soul of AA. I would like, if we may, to applaud the organizers of this wonderful Conference.

## **Quad A**

Okay, so apparently I am supposed to talk about the history of secularism in AA. So let me start with the first meeting, the first secular AA meeting, and it took place forty years after the origins of AA in 1935. It took place in 1975 in Chicago. That's the first meeting.

And it was founded by a guy by the name of Wilson, but not Bill, Don Wilson. In the early sixties he had tried AA and he had attended meetings for six months but left, put off by the religiosity. "I was unable to work it," he said, "because of the religious language in which the 12 steps are couched." He came back a decade later. His drinking had almost killed him.

This time he decided he had to tough it out no matter how hard. Some of us may be familiar with that. After about four years of sobriety, in the autumn of 1974, he gave a talk at a Unitarian Church, "An Agnostic in AA: How It Works for Me". The talk was well received and he ended up delivering it in several Unitarian Universalist churches and in fact one of the ministers encouraged him to start an AA meeting for atheists and agnostics.

The first ever meeting in AA explicitly for non-believers was held on January 7, 1975.

In Chicago. In a church.

The name of the meeting was Alcoholics Anonymous for Atheists and Agnostics which was very quickly shortened to Quad A. And Quad A has had a hugely interesting history in Chicago.

In 1995 an article was written about it in The Chicago Tribune while Quad A was celebrating its twentieth anniversary. It's a wonderful article and for some idiotic reason I have never posted it on AA Agnostica but I am going to in February. It's kind of the equivalent of the Jack Alexander article published in The Saturday Evening Post in 1941 only this one is for we agnostics in AA and it's called "A Different Road". That's the name of the article and it begins like this:

*Six o'clock Saturday night and the drunks are having a party. This is news? It is when the party is in Chicago's Second Unitarian Church on Barry Street. The drunks are sober, and the party is to commemorate the 20th anniversary of a controversial 12-step recovery group – Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) for Atheists and Agnostics, known in AA circles as Quad A (AAAA).*

Today Quad A is going strong. There are twelve meetings in Chicagoland. They are listed by the Chicago Intergroup and in fact and one of the search options when you are looking for a meeting on the Chicagoland Intergroup site is called "Atheist / Agnostic". So you can actually look for those secular meetings in Chicago.

And there is something else I want to mention.

We generally get the impression that Santa Monica was the first Convention or the first collective gathering of agnostics in AA. That's the rumour. But it's wrong. On September 13, 2009, a Quad A Unity Conference was held and it was called "Beyond Alcohol and Addiction: Sobriety, Sanity and Serenity". And over a hundred people attended it. I've got a sixteen page leaflet which was sent to me by Chuck K. in Chicago while I was working on "A History of Agnostic Groups in AA". And it's wonderful! It contains, for example, the Conference schedule which included a number of speakers, terrific speakers. It includes an article about "A Man of Distinction", Don Wilson, who started the first group. It contains a copy of the 1995 article written in the Chicago Tribune called

“A Different Road”. It contains several versions of secular Steps and in the end it decides to describe AA in eight words, which is like four times two words. The first two words being “Quit Drinking”. The second two words “Trust AA”. The third two words “Clean House”. And the last two words “Help Others”. A pretty simple understanding of AA.

## **We Agnostics**

So that was the first agnostic meeting, in Chicago, January 7, 1975. It would take five years for the next group of meetings to start. And that happened in California, that happened in Los Angeles, and that happened because of a wonderful guy by the name of Charlie Polachek.

If you want to read about Charlie, there is an article on AA Agnostica called [Father of We Agnostics Dies](#).

I talked to Charlie on the phone. He died at the age of 98. He told me, he was about 96 or 97 at the time, very proud, he says, “I am the daddy of We Agnostic groups!” Because he started the first group ever called We Agnostics, in 1980, in Hollywood in Los Angeles.

It was very hard for me to find Charlie. Very hard. I talked to people who would have known but didn’t want to tell me, quite frankly. And I am going to talk about this a little bit later, but there were a number of people I talked to at the time, agnostics in AA, who pushed me away. They thought this is going to be far too controversial. And so, strangely enough, the fellow who told me about Charlie Polachek, was James Christopher, who started SOS.

When I talked to Charlie on the phone, again he was quite surprised. I told him that I was writing a book, writing an article “A History of Agnostic Groups in AA” and his response was “Really!” It was so exciting to him that we go public on this. It was so exhilarating to him that this would cease to be a secret within AA. Charlie described himself as both an atheist and a number of people I talked to described him as one of the most spiritual human beings they had ever met. I contacted his daughter Angeliska and shortly after his death – and I’m throwing this in because I just like it – she did a post online and talked about Charlie’s favourite haiku and it goes like this: “In the midst of a meadow / a skylark singing / free from everything”. I like haikus.

Around the year 2000 Charlie moved to Austin, Texas, where he again started a meeting called We Agnostics. He became friends with Nick H. who then started the second meeting for agnostics and atheists in Austin called “Children of Chaos”. Nick is the chair of the host committee that is organizing a Convention for we agnostics, atheists and freethinkers in AA which is to be held, of course, in Austin in November of this year.

I will also note as well that Intergroup for Austin – Hill County, it’s called – also lists “Atheist / Agnostic” as a “meeting type”. So if you are looking for a meeting for atheists and agnostics in Austin there is a category called “Atheists / Agnostics” that you can click on.

By the way the meeting that Charlie started in Hollywood in 1980 still meets every Tuesday and it's going strong. AA and agnostic AA flourished in California in ways that it didn't flourish in other areas.

## New York

So now I would like to talk about New York. Because we had these meetings in Chicago and we had these meetings in California but there was nothing in New York, strangely enough.

So, a guy by the name of Harry, a Californian, placed an ad in – are you familiar with this? – it's called "Free Enquiry". It's a magazine that continues to exist today, it's published today for atheists and agnostics. So Harry wrote this little ad in Free Enquiry, he's a Californian, knew that the thing was circulated throughout America, and his ad was addressed to atheist and agnostic members of AA who were having trouble with the religious nature of many AA meetings.

So Harry does this ad. And strangely enough three people in New York answer it. They send a little letter to Harry. They don't even know each other. But three people from New York do this.

And in fact, that is what inspired the form on AA Agnostica for people wanting an agnostic group in their own community, which people complete, and then we hook them up. I have a dear friend, Chris, who lives in Fort Erie, and he is connecting people virtually on a daily basis who want to start agnostic meetings but don't know that there is anyone else in their area that wants to do that.

So, anyway, these three people write to Harry and Harry writes back and explains how the agnostic meetings work, the formats and all that stuff, and then he connects them together. They are Ada H., John Y. and David L. The first meeting was held at Ada's home on September 10, 1986. It was called We Atheists. It eventually moved to the Jan Hus Church where it still meets today and the name was changed to We Humanists. The three, Ada, John and David, met together for over a decade. For over a decade they went to these meetings together. Thank you Harry, in California.

David eventually moved to Pittsburgh. John Y. died on March 10, 2003. He was a co-founder of the Secular Humanist Society of New York City, a life-long resident of the Bronx and a veteran of World War II. Born in 1921, he got sober in 1962. Ada died in August, 2005, at the age of 83. She had more than 30 years of sobriety. She was a very passionate woman, a socialist and a very wealthy New Yorker. On her tombstone it says that Ada "started an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting for Atheists and Agnostics".

Today, there are sixteen meetings in New York City for agnostics, atheists and freethinkers in AA. Under the search again for meetings there is something called a "special interest" category where you can click on "Agnostic" and again find these meetings.

## Fear

This is all in “A History of Agnostic Groups in AA”. And I am going to come back to Toronto because this is where, for me, the whole story started.

It was on Tuesday evening, as I mentioned, May 31, 2011, that the Greater Toronto Intergroup voted to boot out the two agnostic groups.

The next morning I sent an email to the Toronto Star fully reporting on what had happened. Later I took a phone call from a reporter, Leslie Scrivener. Her story [Does religion belong at AA? Fight over ‘God’ splits Toronto AA groups](#) appeared on the top of the front page of the Toronto Star, just a few days later, on Friday, June 3.

Why did I do that?

There was one simple reason. It struck me that this story should not be buried in the basement of a church. I was not prepared to let that happen.

I want you to know that it took me a couple of years to admit that I did that.

Because I was afraid. At the time I did it I had a year’s sobriety and I was terrified that this behaviour was going to result in me relapsing. Because I had maybe violated a sacred principle in AA, Tradition Ten, “Alcoholics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the AA name ought never be drawn into public controversy.”

Well, I told myself, it’s not an outside issue. It’s a controversy about an inside issue and, dammit, it needs to be dealt with...

I was still afraid.

I want to talk now a little bit about fear. Because if I am going to be honest and talk about a history of secularism in AA, I’m going to talk about fear.

I was personally afraid again later on when I went to a number of follow-up Intergroup meetings. There were more votes on booting out the groups, there were votes on booting another group out, and I have to tell you that at those meetings I was afraid of being beaten up. For the only time in my life I felt afraid for my physical safety. Because there were true whackos at those meetings, who were extremely aggressive and extremely hostile.

It was terrifying. And I am not making any of this up.

You know, and strangely enough, Bill Wilson understood this sort of thing. In the 1965 talk I mentioned earlier he said:

*Simply because we have convictions that work very well for us, it becomes quite easy to assume that we have all of the truth. Whenever this brand of arrogance develops we are sure to become aggressive. We demand agreement with us. We play God. This isn’t good*

*dogma. This is very bad dogma. It could be especially destructive for us of AA to indulge in this sort of thing.*

Bill got it right. You'd think he had been at the Toronto Intergroup meetings. Or maybe the Vancouver Intergroup meetings. Or... But I think I will stop there.

I think we are familiar with fear as alcoholics. As drunks, we are often afraid of being attacked, of being called out, of being arrested. We are afraid of being hurt; we are afraid of hurting others. A few of us drank out of fear. In AA, we secularists are often afraid of being rejected by others in AA.

Fear, fear, fear. And it has affected and continues to affect the history of our secular movement.

Some examples.

One of my favourite websites and one of the earliest for agnostics and atheists in AA is called "Agnostic AA NYC". It's where the worldwide agnostic groups are listed. And it began, get this, in 2002. That's a long time ago.

However, on September 28, 2010, a GSO staffer wrote to the administrator of the website and pointed out that the website referred to addicts as well as alcoholics, still a "no-no" in old-school AA, and worse there was a secular version of the 12 Steps on the website. The GSO person wrote, "So we respectfully request that your group stop calling itself an AA group".

The modified 12 Steps, any reference to addicts were removed from the website. The website is financed by groups in New York and it's their call. I've also asked over the years, several times, that a link from that website be created to AA Agnostica. It's never happened. The fear here is of not being considered AA because of (1) references to addicts (2) secular 12 Steps and (3) an outside affiliation.

So, I think personally, in terms of the fear thing – I'm not unfamiliar with fear – but I'm also no longer a child. It's not as if my parents are telling me to do something and I've got to do it. It's not as if traditional AA says well you can't change the Steps... I'm an adult now. A certain amount of self-respect and integrity I think goes with that. And yet I acknowledge that the idea of fitting in and the idea of being welcomed are kind of key components in all human beings including we alcoholics but I just wanted to mentioned the topic and how I think it has played to a degree in our own history within AA.

## **Moving Forward**

Now I want to talk about moving forward.

And the first thing I want to talk about is literature. Because we have made such enormous progress in so many ways.



In 2011, the first book for agnostics in AA was published. It is called *Waiting: A Nonbelievers Higher Power* by Marya Hornbacher. She was of course a speaker at the Santa Monica Convention. Terrific book.

In 2013. I have a friend you may have heard of, Joe C. He started the Beyond Belief group in Toronto, he was one of the people who started it, and Joe C. and I are members of it. That's our home group. We meet there every Thursday. In 2013 Joe and I were in an incredible competition. He was working to publish *Beyond Belief* and I was trying to publish *The Little Book: A Collection of Alternative 12 Steps*. And I thought "dammit, no matter what happens I'm publishing this before he publishes his book". And he beat me, by about two weeks. I think both books are great. I really do. Joe's book *Beyond Belief* has turned out to be hugely helpful. It's a book of daily reflections. I know any number of groups across the world who use it, who will read the daily reflection, and then have a discussion at their meeting following that reading. So it's a very, very popular book.

I never planned to publish a book, a single book. But *The Little Book* just came to be. I was working with this woman Linda R. at the time and we were in touch with Gabe S. who was in England and Gabe had a collection of alternative 12 Steps and he sent them to us and I thought what an interesting idea a whole collection of alternative 12 Steps but we didn't have enough for a book and then we started looking for secular interpretations of the 12 Steps and found some terrific interpretations. *A Woman's Way Through the Twelve Steps*: Linda condensed that down into short interpretations of each of the Steps. I ran into Gabor Mate who had written *In The Realm of Hungry Ghosts* and he had an appendix with a secular interpretation of the 12 Steps so now we had two. And then we ended up having four. And then as I say I wrote a history of the origins of the Steps as well in that book and then we decided to publish it. And that was the beginning of publishing books of that nature.

In 2014, AA Agnostica published two more books. One was *Don't Tell: Stories and Essays by Agnostics and Atheists in AA* which were stories that had been published on AA Agnostica. And the other one was *The Alternative 12 Steps: A Secular Guide to Recovery*, which I love. I love this book. It was written actually in 1991 by two women, Martha Cleveland and Arlys G. but had been out of print forever. And yet I discovered it and I approached a publisher and said can I publish it and they said no, not without permission, so I spent a year tracking down Arlys G. and she got together with Martha and they said, yes, publish it, do a Second Edition. 1991: A Secular Guide to Recovery. Alternative 12 Steps. I am so honored and pleased to be able to have published that book.

There are of course all kinds of other books that have come out. *A Freethinker in Alcoholics Anonymous* which was reviewed by our friend Thomas here, written by John Lauritsen. A great book. What else do we have? *The 12 Step Philosophy of Alcoholics Anonymous* by a Brit. But all I am saying now in terms of the history of secularism in AA is there is a huge amount of literature today.

And you know what? I wish I would have had it. When I got out of rehab, I wish someone would have been able to hand me a book, other than the Big Book, because I found the Big Book offensive from Day 1. I just wish that someone would have handed me something and said, "Here read this. You will be inspired". Today that can happen. And we should be very proud of ourselves for that.

There are all kinds of websites. Rebellion Dogs Publishing. Joe C. manages that website. There is AA Agnostica which has been kind of succeeded by AA Beyond Belief, by my good friend John S., who is now doing that website and podcasts. You'll hear this talk on AA Beyond Belief. Terrific website. And then there are 25 websites for individual or groups of agnostic meetings and I think there is one for this area as well. So there is all kinds of websites, all kinds of information.

Meetings. Let's talk about meetings. We focussed a lot on meetings at the beginning of this talk, when they started, where they started. When "A History of Agnostic Groups" was completed in 2012, there was a total of 87 agnostic meetings worldwide listed on the New York website. Today, I just talked to Deirdre a few days ago, prior to this meeting and asked "How many meetings are there?" Today, there is 288. We've added two hundred in a few years. We have gone from agnostic meetings in three states to agnostic meetings in 40 states in the U.S. and four provinces in Canada. And I know of many, many more that are now starting. It's fantastic.

Conventions and conferences. Well, the first one was in Chicago in 2009, second in Santa Monica in November 2014, Phoenix in November 2015, Olympia 2016 and Austin, Texas, coming up in November.

So there are plenty of reasons to be hopeful. We are going strong my friends. We are with the tide, as it were.

As we go forward I would recommend two things. First, let's drop the fear. At least as much as possible. Here's my last quote from Bill Wilson, I promise, again from his speech in 1965: "All people must necessarily rally to the call of their own particular convictions and we of AA are no exception. All people should have the right to voice their convictions."

And finally, I want to share a bit of advice, something I don't do that often. As we go forward as agnostics and atheists in AA, as secularists, one day at a time, let's try to have a good time. Let's enjoy ourselves. Otherwise what the hell's the point? Thank you all for listening to me. It has been an honour to be here today.

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