

SOAAR 2023

Secular AA; Past, Present & Future

By Roger C.

My sobriety date is March 8, 2010. I was 60 years old then. I had been drinking like a true idiot for decades. And I had done a great deal of damage to my life, and the lives of others. I ruined a number of relationships and two marriages. I won't go on about the problems created by my alcoholism because that's not today's topic.

But you know I had been trying to stop drinking way back then. I went to CAMH (The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health) and a number of AA meetings. I would stop and buy alcohol on the way home from those meetings. And then finally I got a DUI. My brother and my current wife (who had been attending a number of Al-Anon meetings) – the only two friends I had at the time – pushed me into going to a rehab facility, Homewood in Guelph. That DUI and the rehab turned out to be the end of my drinking. I didn't want to lose any more friends. And I wanted a new and a better life.

After getting out of rehab, I went to a lot of "traditional" AA meetings. And it got to the point where I just couldn't stand them. Too much of the God stuff.

As Bill Wilson once put it (in 1961):

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.

In Bill's Big Book – otherwise known as *Alcoholics Anonymous* – his aggression is indeed crude. Personally, I can't stand it. God or Him, etc., is mentioned 281 times in the 164 pages of the Big Book. And there are also two awful chapters: *We Agnostics* and *To Wives*.

And then, of course, the 12 Steps have a God or Him in six of them.

For the record, I was brought up as a Catholic. My mother was very religious, and she certainly pushed it on me. We went to a Catholic church every Sunday.

And when I was in grade 2, I was put in a Catholic school. We would begin each and every day at the school with the Lord's Prayer.

In the United States, the Lord's Prayer was prohibited in schools in 1962. In Canada it wasn't until 1988 that the use of the Lord's Prayer in schools ended. The Ontario Court of Appeal ruled that the "recitation of the Lord's Prayer ... imposes religious observances on nonbelievers" and that is a violation of an individual's freedom of conscience.

Finally, when I was 19 years old, I literally exploded and decided that there was no God. None of the God stuff made sense to me.

A God, a Heaven, a Hell, and a Purgatory? Is this something I was supposed to believe? If I was a good enough person when I died, would I be in purgatory for a couple of million years and in Heaven for an eternity? This makes zero sense at all to me.

Around that time, I began to go to universities. And what was I studying? Well, it was religion! Quite simply, I wanted to know what evidence there was of a deity, and simply whether the God thing was Fact or Fiction.

I got a Bachelor of Arts degree in Religious Studies at Laurentian University in 1978. Later on, I went to McGill University in Montreal. I got a Master of Arts degree in Religious Studies there in 1982. And then I began working on my PhD at McGill. I taught. I learnt. I even learned Koine Greek so I could read the New Testament in its original language. In all my time there, there was never any evidence or proof that a God existed. Believing in a God has nothing to do with logic. It's faith. And this is the definition of faith in the New Testament: "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

The God thing is Faith. Nothing to do with Fact.

Okay, so now let's go back to my getting out of rehab and going to traditional AA meetings. I was repeatedly told that unless I believed in a God, I would start drinking again. I would again be a drunk. Has anyone here ever had a similar experience?

Almost all of these meetings I attended ended with the Lord's Prayer. And the people claimed that the Lord's Prayer had nothing to do with religion. That's just, well, "bullshit".

I realized I could no longer go to these meetings. I couldn't understand how I could have been treated so very well as an agnostic at the faculty of religious studies at McGill and treated so badly in AA as a guy struggling to stay sober and in need of as much respect and support as possible. 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 a superb meeting.

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

This meeting – the full name is Beyond Belief Agnostics and Freethinkers – was created by Joe C. and was launched on September 24th, 2009, at the University of Toronto on Bloor Street West in Toronto.

It is the oldest active agnostic Alcoholics Anonymous group in all of Canada. And I loved attending it. I live in Hamilton, and it would take me an hour and a half to get to the meeting and another

hour and a half to get back home. But I would attend Beyond Belief every single Thursday, after I found the meeting, and very often I would also be there on Saturday.

Soon thereafter other agnostic groups were launched in the Toronto area.

And guess what? These groups and meetings were booted out of AA. Here is a quote from Joe:

What I haven't shared yet is the expulsion of our Beyond Belief group - as well as the We Agnostics group - from the Greater Toronto Area Intergroup (GTAI) on May 31, 2011. And the Widening our Gateway group on April 24, 2012. Why was this done? Because we had our own secular versions of the 12 Steps. The expulsions lasted a long time. Until Larry K. launched a formal legal challenge against this action via the Ontario Human Rights Tribunal on September 18, 2014. Until AA World Services unanimously decided on the expulsion of the GTAI on October 31, 2016. Until, finally, the chair of the GTAI announced at a meeting that the ousted secular AA groups were to be re-listed and treated as respected members. This happened on January 31, 2017. Almost six years after the expulsion. And since then, our secular groups have indeed been treated as legitimate and respected members of the Greater Toronto Area Intergroup.

Again, why were the groups booted out of AA? Simply because they had a secular version of the 12 Steps. No God in the Steps. Imagine that. So, this was the behavior of the GTAI central office at the time: "Hey you don't believe in a God? Then get the hell out of AA."

The experience was brutal, and I – Roger, the guy with a BA and an MA in Religious Studies – was outraged. I called the newspaper, The Toronto Star, and within a day or two they published an article on the very top of the front page: ***Does Religion Belong at AA? Fight over 'God' splits Toronto AA Groups.***

It was all so hard on we secular folks in recovery. I remember being at the Beyond Belief meeting a day or two after we were booted out, and a number of us folks were concerned that no one would now be able to find a secular group, because it was no longer listed on the GTAI website. A bunch of the people at the meeting were crying. So was I. I had been sober then for a little over 14 months and felt very vulnerable. Toronto is the largest city in Canada and at the time there were some five hundred AA meetings every week. Every week! These meetings were all on the GTAI website. But now the secular groups would no longer be there and how would these meetings be found?

So we decided to launch a website.

And we did! It was initially called **AA Toronto Agnostics** and it was created simply to let people know about the times and locations of our agnostic meetings.

At the time I was also very curious about the history of, quote, "secular AA". So I did some research. I figured I would have it all done over a weekend, but it took me three months. Here's a wee bit of the history.

The first ever secular AA meeting - explicitly for nonbelievers - was held in Chicago, and, not surprisingly, at a Unitarian Universalist Church. It was organized by a fellow named Don W.

It hadn't always been easy for Don. In the early sixties he had tried AA and had attended meetings for six months but left, put off by all the religiosity. "I was unable to work it, because of the religious language in which the 12 steps are couched," he said.

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.

So, he launched a secular AA meeting on January 7, 1975, and this became known as Quad A: Alcoholics Anonymous for Atheists and Agnostics (AAAA). There are currently about 15 Quad A meetings - online and in-person - in Chicago.

The second secular AA meeting was launched in 1980 in Los Angeles. I had the pleasure of speaking on the phone to the founder of the meeting, Charlie P. This is what he told me: "I am the daddy of all the 'We Agnostics' groups!"

Indeed, he founded the first ever meeting called We Agnostics. At the time Charlie was 66 years old and had been sober in AA for nine years. "I was a nonbeliever and I felt that it was only fitting and proper to have a meeting which was friendly to nonbelievers."

He certainly got that right. And here's something his granddaughter, Angel, told me: "My grandfather once told me that he was not a religious person, but that he was a spiritual person. I thank him for showing me, and many others, the freedom of that distinction."

Okay, I'll stop there, even though I could go on and on about the early secular AA meetings in the United States. And remember, one of the very first one's in Canada was Beyond Belief in Toronto, launched in 2009, and still active today.

Again, when Beyond Belief was booted out of AA in 2011, we launched a website. Originally known as AA Toronto Agnostics, after six months I changed its name to AA Agnostica.

New articles were published on the website for 10 years, from June 2011 to June 2021. Some of my favorites - 50 - were re-posted in the eleventh year which ended in June 2022. The site is nevertheless still up and alive, with, these days, approximately 750 people visiting it each and every day.

While the initial purpose of the site was to provide the dates and times of secular AA meetings, I invited people to write articles and share their thoughts about AA and the need for a secular nature of Alcoholics Anonymous.

And, boy, did we get a lot of articles. We mostly posted an article every Sunday, but fairly often on Wednesdays too. And the people writing the articles were from around the world. While most were written by Americans and Canadians, there were many other authors from Great Britain, Poland, Australia, India, Ireland, etc.

And here's the number: Over the decade a total of 742 articles were published.

Now a few people wrote a number of articles. Let me mention the top three. Over the decade I wrote 83 articles. Our friend, Joe, wrote 22 articles. And another friend, bob k, wrote a total of 54 articles.

The site has always been popular. To date there has been a total of 4 million people visiting the site. And there has been a huge diversity of articles. But here are the top three that have been viewed, and this should not be a surprise. The most popular article, visited daily, is **An Atheist's Guide to 12-Step Recovery**. It has so far had a total of 200,000 viewers. The second most popular is the **Alternative 12 Steps**. That's on the menu and contains six secular versions of the 12 Steps, and to date has had 160,000 views. And the third most popular, with 100,000 viewers, is **Rewriting the 12 Steps for Atheists**.

This isn't just the success of AA Agnostica but it's also very much the failure of traditional AA and the AA Central Office to help and support the people these days who simply don't believe in a supernatural, male interventionist deity. And obviously the God stuff shouldn't be pushed on folks in recovery - as it often is - at traditional AA meetings.

So let me now talk a bit about books. The rehab facility I was at when I got sober had a bookstore. But I looked and looked and there wasn't a single book that I was at all interested in reading.

A few years after launching AA Agnostica, I decided to publish a book. For whatever reason, maybe you can figure it out, I chose to call it **The Little Book**. By the way, I have a few copies here and you can purchase one if you want. Anyway, the book contains 20 mostly secular versions of the 12 Steps, four excellent interpretations of each of the Steps (including interpretations by Gabor Maté) and an essay I wrote called *The Origins of the 12 Steps*. When I put the book together, I was attending the Beyond Belief meeting in Toronto and thus spending a good deal of time with Joe. He too had been writing a book (for something like five years) called **Beyond Belief – Agnostic Musings for 12 Step Life**. I wanted to publish my book before he published his, but he beat me to it. His was published on January 21, 2013, and mine a month later, on February 20.

Oh well. In all, I ended up publishing a dozen books. And, overall, 93 books – each and every one of them about secular recovery – were reviewed on AA Agnostica! Many of these were truly superb books.

For example, one of them is called **Staying Sober Without God** and it was written by Jeffrey Munn and published on January 6, 2019. By the way, in September of 2019, the previous Secular Ontario AA Roundup (SOAAR) was held in my town, Hamilton. The organizers of that SOAAR – which would include me and Carolyn – were very fond of Munn's book. What did we do? Well, we gave him a call and invited him to our SOAAR. He agreed to come so we happily paid for his flight to and from California.

I'm going to talk about just one more book. It's called **The Alternative 12 Steps – A Secular Guide to Recovery**.

It's an amazing book written by two women and was originally published – imagine this, way back then – in 1991. It was no longer available when I found a used copy of it 2013. I decided to publish a second edition but, of course, I needed the permission of the authors. It took me over a year to find the authors, Martha and Arlys, and they happily provided me with written permission to republish it. That was done in 2014. Of the secular AA books that I am now selling on Amazon all over the world, it's my bestseller. If you are interested in buying this book, I have copies of them here with me today.

Okay, I'm nearing the end of my talking.

I just want to speak now about ICSAA: The International Conference of Secular AA. The very first conference for secular folks in AA was held in November 2014. I did everything possible with the website to encourage people to attend. And many did. Ten articles about the conference were published on AA Agnostica.

Here's a bit of what I wrote, after the conference:

It was something of a miracle, if I may be so bold as to use that word.

Almost three hundred women and men gathered in Santa Monica, California, in early November 2014 for the first-ever convention for atheists, agnostics and freethinkers in AA.

It was, at the very least, an historical event...

The convention lasted three very busy days. Consistent with its theme of Many Paths to Recovery, it was stunningly rich and diverse with fifteen panels, twenty-three workshops and ten speakers.

The second conference was held in Austin Texas in 2016. An article about it was written by my friend life-j who passed away in December 2019. He had actually written a total of eighteen articles on AA Agnostica. Here is a quote from him re: the convention: "Our secular movement has... given me a new life, a new group of people with whom I can relate with honesty. That new life was reinforced dramatically at the convention in Austin."

Of course, the third ICSAA was held in Toronto in 2018. An article about the conference was written by Carolyn – did I mention her earlier? – and here is just a bit of it:

I am a relative newcomer to Secular AA (just over one year) and on attending the International Conference of Secular AA in downtown Toronto at the Marriott Hotel this past weekend I experienced the same feelings of joy, relief and of having finally found my people that I experienced in my first meeting of secular AA.

With 268 delegates from around the world – including countries such as Great Britain, France, Australia and Poland – the conference was filled with a sense of fellowship and lively debate. Secular AA is alive and vibrant.

Of course, there hasn't been a conference since then, because of the pandemic. BUT the next in-person International Conference of Secular AA will be held in September of next year in Orlando, Florida. I certainly intend to be there...

Two final thoughts.

First, I just want to mention that I launched two in-person AA meetings in Hamilton. Both are called "We Agnostics" and are held on Mondays and Thursdays. There are also zoom meetings – on Wednesdays and Saturdays- which were created because of the pandemic. BUT I personally much prefer the in-person meetings and believe that they are far more helpful, especially for those in early recovery.

Finally, I want to mention that a while back I attended a conference with some 500 people at McMaster University. The topic was God Fact or Fiction and there were three speakers – A Christian, a Muslim and an Atheist. I was the atheist.

And here is how I ended my speech then and how I am ending it today:

If I don't believe in a God, what do I think living my life is all about? That's the question I asked myself way back then, when I was 19 years old. Well, I'm going to be silly and mention my favorite band, The Beatles. Life to me is well described in the name of one of their albums. It's a Magical Mystery Tour. Surprisingly I enjoy each and every day. It's my tour. The magical mystery one. And the title of the last song on the album is "All You Need Is Love."

I agree. That's something we all need. Not Fiction.

Thank you all.