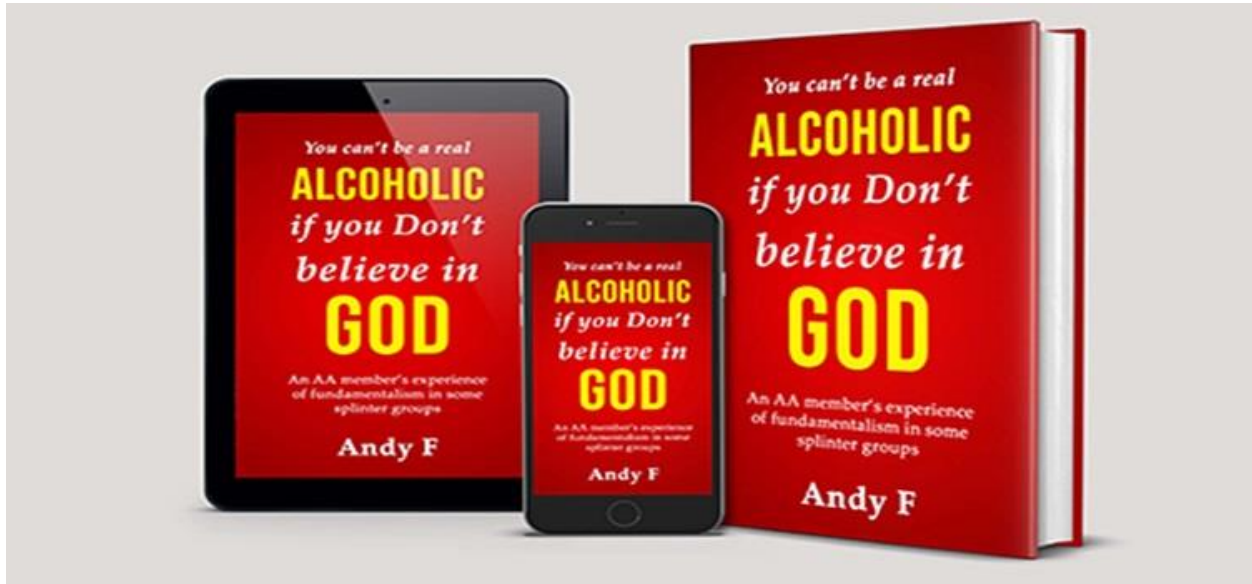


# The Dangers of AA Fundamentalism



*By Andy F.*

My name is Andy, and I'm an alcoholic. I arrived in AA on May 15th, 1984, after many years of drinking. I loved AA from the outset. I had found a family atmosphere that was missing from childhood. I was placed in foster care at an early age and subjected to very religious regimes, including church several times a week. Sadly, there was no love, only coldness, rejection, and criticism. Childhood needs for acceptance and love were absent. Through my childlike eyes, I stopped believing that God even existed. He was never there in the religious family that I grew up in.

My biological mother took me out of foster care when I was nine years old. She sent me to a Catholic Boarding School for the remainder of my education. The strict religious doctrines continued, and by my early teens, I had rejected anything to do with God and religion.

When I first arrived at AA, I was full of resentment toward everything and everyone, including God and religion. Reading through the twelve steps, I was horrified that the old nemesis had returned. Step two spoke of a higher power, and step three mentioned God. At the time, God and a higher power meant the same thing. I quickly realized this would be too challenging and impossible for an unbeliever.

As a confirmed agnostic, I was unwilling to get a sponsor and be guided through the program. Rejecting the twelve steps resulted in misery and relapse for many years in AA. Eventually, I came across an agnostic-friendly sponsor. He agreed to take me through the program, suggesting I use AA itself as a power greater than me. It worked! I am now 27 years sober and have the privilege of helping other atheists and agnostics through the program.

I suffered so much as a serial relapser that I became passionate about carrying a message of hope to other non-believers in recovery. I wrote a book about my experiences going through the steps as an agnostic and became an avid blogger.

About a year ago, a friend suggested that I post my blogs on a website that had a forum for alcoholics. It is called "I drink too much." All kinds of blogs and articles are written there, mainly by AA members. My blogs are about my experiences in AA as an agnostic. Almost immediately, the articles I posted started to attract judgment and criticism. It was always from the same group of AA members. I would describe them as 'Big Book thumpers.' These people take the Big Book literally and believe that you can't stay sober without God.

A contributor to the forum strongly suggested that I refrain from posting more content on the forum. He insinuated that Secular AA is a subversive movement in the fellowship and undermines the unity of AA. He went on to say that an agnostic or atheist position in AA has nothing to do with the pure and undiluted message described in the Big Book. This member suggested that I was harming newcomers by telling them that they could get sober without God, which came as a shock.

Several weeks later, he felt compelled to write me a private email on the forum. He told me that I was corrupting the AA program with my articles. In the interests of newcomers to AA, he tried to dissuade me from contributing any further articles promoting agnostic recovery. And yet, here I was, living proof that it is possible to achieve a happy and lasting sobriety without the need to believe in a deity.

Then, he made a statement that left me lost for words. As someone with 40 years in the program, I couldn't believe what I heard. What he said struck me as being in total conflict with the all-inclusive ethos of AA. Of course, the third tradition of AA instructs us that he has every right to pursue his recovery in any way that works for him. Conversely, I have every right to work my program as an agnostic.

***"The only requirement for AA membership is a desire to stop drinking."***

I cannot deny that I felt uncomfortable with the aggressive way in which he imposed his views as if they were infallible and sacrosanct.

Here is what he said:

***"You can't be a real alcoholic if you don't believe in God."***

I wondered how newly sober members would react if told that they couldn't be 'real' alcoholics if they didn't believe in God. What is a 'real' alcoholic anyway? Was this the very thing a newcomer wanted to hear? What better excuse to go back out drinking than for an alcoholic to go back out and research whether or not they are a 'real' alcoholic? Most members of AA are aware that no one in the fellowship is qualified to offer a diagnosis of anyone's drinking problem except the alcoholic himself. (BB "*More about alcoholism*" page 31)

I became concerned about the impact of such a declaration on confused, sometimes vulnerable newcomers. Many have little or no faith in God or greater power. What might happen to them if extremists began influencing them? How many non-believers might walk away from AA after hearing this type of rhetoric?

As an agnostic member of AA, I found this statement to be one of the most dishonest, divisive, and destructive declarations I have ever heard in the fellowship. Of course, it is his right to believe in anything he wants, but could he harm newcomers by forcefully imposing his ideas on them?

I felt an obligation to make newly sober members aware of the dangers of this type of fundamentalism. It is not the first time I've encountered an extremist approach to recovery. Years ago, when I was still struggling with relapse, I came into contact with a hard-core splinter group in London. I witnessed dangerous beliefs and attitudes that had nothing to do with the principles of AA.

I decided to document my experiences of fundamentalism in AA, which reminded me of cult-like religious fundamentalism. I wrote a short book called *"You can't be a real alcoholic if you don't believe in God"*. The book is available for free download by scrolling down on the homepage of my website:

<https://aaforagnostics.com/>

If you find value in the content of this short publication, please share it with others. Many lost and vulnerable newcomers may benefit from increasing their awareness. I hope that they avoid getting involved with a fundamentalist sponsor or splinter group.

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*Andy F went to his first meeting on May 15th, 1984. Having had negative experiences with religion and religious people in childhood, he found it impossible to embrace the twelve steps. Frequent references to God and a higher power put him off completely. He decided to pursue his recovery through therapy. Unfortunately, it didn't keep him sober. He became a serial relapser and, several times, came close to losing his life. Eventually, he was lucky to find an experienced oldtimer happy to work with an agnostic. Andy was able to stay sober and recreate his life. It's now been twenty-seven years since his last relapse. He is committed to sponsorship and has become an avid blogger. Andy's blogs are about his experiences in recovery as an agnostic alcoholic.*

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