

Secular Spirituality



By Andy F.

Atheists and Agnostics in AA

Agnosticism and religion are two contentious topics. Rarely does either truly embrace a tangible inner spirituality. It's a personal journey in discovering who we are and what works for us. Freedom to choose one's spiritual beliefs should be the catalyst of any organization. Sadly, so many AA members leave because of the 'God' word. It appears in 5 of the 12-step steps.

I struggled with the idea of a monotheistic God and relapsed many times. On several occasions, I almost lost my life to alcohol. I couldn't handle what I saw as the religious aspect of AA, so I never attempted the steps at all.

Over the years, I have spoken to many atheists and agnostics who came to AA and, on seeing the twelve steps, walked out again. Some of them came back when their drinking got bad enough. What about those that didn't make it back!?

A clinical study published in September 2002 concluded:

"God belief appears to be relatively unimportant in deriving AA-related benefit, but atheist and agnostic clients are less likely to initiate and sustain AA attendance relative to spiritual and religious clients. This apparent reticence to affiliate with AA ought to be clinically recognized when encouraging AA participation."

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/12380849>

“For the times, they are a-changin” – Bob Dylan

I want to reassure non-believers that AA has changed. The fellowship has had to adapt and change with the times. Church attendance is declining, as is belief in the traditional idea of a monotheistic God. More and more people are moving away from religion and finding meaning in modern non-theistic spirituality.

New Age, Eastern, and metaphysical spirituality have become increasingly popular with truth seekers worldwide. A belief in universal consciousness as a higher power is fast surpassing the dogmas of traditional Religion. Consciousness is seen as a creative and benevolent power that helps us transcend the limitations of the ego self.

These days, AA has had no alternative but to move away from the religiosity of a monotheistic God. It has begun to embrace something called secular spirituality. What is that?

Secular spirituality

“Secular spirituality is the adherence to a spiritual philosophy without adherence to a religion. It emphasizes the individual’s inner peace rather than a relationship with the divine. Secular spirituality is made up of the search for meaning outside of a religious institution. It considers one’s relationship with the self, others, nature, and whatever else one considers the ultimate. Often, the goal of secular spirituality is living happily and/or helping others.”

Wikipedia

More and more AA members now believe that members who don’t believe in God can interpret the twelve steps through secular spirituality. I and many others have found a way to work the twelve steps as non-believers.

The principles of AA remain the same for atheists and agnostics. We all share a commitment to spiritual growth and helping others. For instance, we’ve found that a ‘higher power’ can be interpreted as the strength and support of our AA community, a belief that unites us all.

Others say that members can get sober without believing in an unseen, God-like higher power. Moreover, some aspects of the steps, like admitting powerlessness and making amends, are also practically effective for non-believers.

A landmark event

The religious fundamentalists in AA have always believed that the AA Big Book is infallible. The idea that only God can help alcoholics recover from alcoholism was considered sacrosanct.

Several years ago, a landmark event occurred in Alcoholics Anonymous’s history. In May 2017, the AA Conference approved a new pamphlet for publication. It isn’t easy to get new literature approved by the Conference.

This new piece of AA literature, now approved by the Conference, is the result of the dedicated efforts of the Thursday Islington Agnostic, Atheist, and Freethinkers group in London, UK.

Here is the first paragraph of the pamphlet:

“A.A. is not a religious organization. Alcoholics Anonymous has only one requirement for membership, and that is the desire to stop drinking. There is room in A.A. for people of all shades of belief and non-belief.”

The pamphlet is called [The “God” Word](#) and freely available by clicking the link.

Where is AA heading spiritually?

How does the dictionary define secularism? It means *“neutrality towards all religions.”* (Wiktionary) That being the case, it could be argued that AA has always been secular. With the publication of The “God” word pamphlet, this seems more evident than ever before. If *“AA is not a religious organization,”* then by definition, it is secular.

Does this mean that AA is to exclude members that believe in the traditional God of religion; certainly not! AA warmly welcomes every alcoholic who has a *“desire to stop drinking.”* (Regardless of *“Belief and non-belief”* – The “God” word pamphlet.)

“The only requirement for AA membership is a desire to stop drinking.”
(Tradition Three)

Excerpts from Bill’s writings

One of the greatest legacies left to AA by Bill W (AA’s co-founder) was the belief that as a spiritually based organization, AA should always be “all-inclusive.”

A short excerpt from *‘The dilemma of no faith’* by Bill Wilson:

*“Consequently, the full individual liberty to practice any creed or principle or therapy whatever should be a first consideration for us all. Let us not, therefore, pressure anyone with our individual or even our collective views. Let us instead accord each other the respect and love that is due to every human being as he tries to make his way toward 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.”*

Bill W.

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Here is another quote from Bill, an excerpt from *‘Responsibility is our theme’*:

*“Let us instead accord each other the respect and love that is due to every human being as he tries to make his way toward 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.”*

'All-inclusive' – The mark of true spiritual power

As an enquiring agnostic, I have always been very suspicious of any religion or spiritual organization that insists new members accept their particular set of beliefs. This type of blind faith has never worked for me. I have always had to arrive at my own conclusions, ask questions, and seek answers. This approach to spirituality is the only thing that keeps my search honest and authentic.

Whenever I encounter any spiritual or religious doctrine that insists its way is the only way, I immediately become discouraged. My mind becomes closed to any further spiritual investigation. I have always felt that to be accepted into a religion, a new member must embrace its doctrine as the ultimate truth. In my mind, this type of rigid religious dogma made it exclusive and not inclusive.

Acceptance immediately became conditional. If I wanted to enjoy the benefits of their religious community, I would have to comply with their beliefs as being infallible. I was unable to do this as it never felt honest. When that happened, I had no alternative but to walk away.

I am so grateful that [Secular AA](#) and [AA Agnostica](#) are becoming increasingly visible in the AA landscape. It has given me the space and freedom to pursue my journey towards spiritual truth in a way that works for me.

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.

For more information about Andy and the books that he has written and published and are currently available, click here: <https://aaforagnostics.com/>.
