

# Secular AA



**By Vince Hawkins**

What is Secular AA? Who is it for? What use is it? Is it a threat to traditional AA? It's an odd thing to review your own book, but thanks to Roger at [aaagnostica.org](http://aaagnostica.org) for the challenge and I'll try to step away for an objective perspective. There is no official connection of the book to the Secular AA organization, but I am a member of Secular AA and have been since its inception. So you could say that my book is an inside job.

*Secular AA* includes a history of the Secular AA wing of AA from its foundation in Santa Monica on 6-8 November 2014 with the WAFT convention.

*Secular AA* includes sections on meetings, steps and "How AA Got Religion" which is a repeat of a chapter in *An Atheists Unofficial Guide to AA*. However, sympathetic readers, and especially new ones, will hopefully enjoy another airing.

*Secular AA* covers the ground where members write their own programs. It aims to provide the tools and inspiration for a truly personal journey in recovery where the travellers can take pride in their own work.

There is no suggestion that they do it alone. There is plenty of help available from members willing to make suggestions and nudge new members here and there in the right direction if they are going off piste. My own greater powers comprise all the people who have helped me along the way; all the people I have helped; and a few things at first sight less tangible like evolution and nature.

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Advanced design &  
build your own program

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However, I throw my hands up when I hear some guru-type say “there is only one program ... mine – or the Big Book way.” Or a well-meaning Joe Soap might say “I only know one way to do the program – the way I was taught – so you’ll have to do it that way, too.” My idea of a sponsor is someone who helps other members to construct their own programs.

But *Secular AA* does not rubbish traditional AA. I ‘did the steps’ in the Big Book before embarking on an independent voyage and the experience provided an ideal benchmark against which to measure my own ideas.

*Secular AA* includes a foreword where the honest admission is made that a secular meeting we started in Valencia, Spain, folded after six years. It touches real life where we can learn from past experience and move on. I’m reminded of the NA preamble which refers to the ‘*spiritual*’ principles of honesty, open-mindedness and willingness.

*Secular AA* takes a look at spirituality. “People in the secular camp are at odds with each other about whether there can be non-religious spirituality or whether the word is synonymous with religion. People in the religious camp are equally at odds with each other along the same lines. So there are four groups. Religious people of either standpoint and non-religious people of either standpoint. I used to think the only answer was to delete the word from the English language! However, I have recently come across the acronym SBNR. **Spiritual But Not Religious.** This is used by people describing themselves to potential mates on dating sites. For me it ends discussion about whether ‘spiritual’ is *only* synonymous with religion or whether there exist various kinds of secular spirituality. The traditional AA program *could* be spiritual without being religious.”

### **Who is this work aimed at?**

“It is aimed at alcoholics put off traditional Alcoholics Anonymous by the god content of its literature and paraphernalia at its meetings like the banners on the wall showing the AA Twelve Steps.

“It suggests that members forge their own programs. It assumes that members can decide for themselves whether to adopt a step-based program and how they define spirituality. There are as many ways of dealing with the program as people doing it. So this is a secular version of the program. The object is purely to widen the net which catches the imagination of people who have been attracted into AA’s ambit so that a greater number can get the program, giving up alcohol happily and becoming contented, decently functioning human beings.

“First, this book helps a newcomer to address the essential question: am I an alcoholic? For those deciding in the affirmative or continuing to ponder the question we move on to the basic premise of accepting the need for change and stopping drinking as in step 1. Then we have to deal with the withdrawals, a process which can take up to two years like dealing with any post traumatic stress disorder.

The timetable is adaptable just like everything else in AA but, if the individual chooses to work through a series of steps of their own devising, or choice, it would seem advisable to stick to the order of steps laid down.

“I worked on traditional steps 1–3 over and over again in the early days while I went through the worst of the withdrawals. But right from the off I rewrote parts that didn’t fit. Then, when ready, a member should get a sponsor or sponsors and embark on remedial action followed by clearing away the wreckage of the past. Later comes daily self-improvement and, finally, helping others.

“Then this book addresses people outside AA: the family of a recovering alcoholic and the connections of an alcoholic who still drinks – family and employer. The A–Z explains terms in AA that a newcomer or connections of an alcoholic might hear without at first understanding what they mean.

“Sections of the Big Book to which I refer readers directly are Chapters 3 *more about alcoholism* and 10 *to employers*, parts of Chapter 2 *there is a solution* and Chapter 5, and the Doctor’s Opinion which is a foreword. Readers wishing to check out AA co-founder, Bill W’s story will find that it forms Chapter 1 of the Big Book. Dr Bob’s story (AA’s other co-founder) and those of other early members are in the back of the Big Book.

“I do not refer atheists or agnostics to Chapter 4 of the Big Book, *We Agnostics*, but suggest readers who hold a religious belief refer to it. Ultimately this chapter does not accept agnostic views, let alone atheist ones: it implies that eventually, if one works the program properly, one is bound to share the god-based views of the majority of AA’s founding members. I reject this idea unequivocally.

“Nevertheless, while there are parts of the Big Book that are unashamedly religious, or dated, when it is filleted of these old bones much remains on the plate that is still helpful. I have paraphrased some of this helpful content or pointed out where readers can find it. Many ideas come from other sources and a good deal of it is even original.”

Nowadays, with the Secular AA option, there is no longer an absolute need to progress through the twelve steps. Many members do so, but now it is possible to construct your own program and if this is the course you decide to take, you will need to seek support from more experienced members who are sympathetic to the route you have decided to take.

What of the steps? There are 12 steps in AA, but I believe they can be whittled down to four.

- Abstinence: this is the crux. The rest is a distraction from the withdrawals to enable one to stop drinking.
- A self-appraisal to enable DIY self-improvement and the emergence of a contented, useful, human being.

- Amends to anyone you've harmed in the past to help get rid of guilt and shame and improve self-esteem.
- 'Maintenance' including calming mechanisms like meditation and daily personal inventory, apologising where appropriate and helping others.

The original *Alcoholics Anonymous* was published in 1939, written by Bill Wilson who I believe was an agnostic. Nevertheless he borrowed heavily from the Oxford Group. AA and the Oxford Group were ships that followed a similar course for a few short years. Then they went their separate ways, but the influence of the Oxford Group from those days has remained set in stone in the Big Book.

From its Christian roots the Oxford Group is now an informal, international network of people of many faiths and backgrounds seeking world peace. Now known as Initiatives of Change, it encourages the involvement of participants in political and social issues. One of the Oxford Group's core ideas was that change of the world starts with seeking change in oneself.

While AA also acknowledges the importance of change, ironically this does not apply to its basic textbook.

So, what use is Secular AA? It fills in the void of change that traditional AA has failed to make. Is it a threat to traditional AA? Not at all, it's just helping to nudge AA into the modern world. Did you know that Secular AA has even booked a hospitality suite to show itself at the AA world convention in Vancouver in July. Books like mine will not be on sale there, but that's another story ... ..

*Secular AA* will be my final addiction book because I've had too many birthdays, both belly button and AA, and if I write any more it will be fiction to add to my one masterpiece to date in that area *Trader Bob. An Atheists Unofficial Guide to AA* came out in 2011; the daily reader *Everyone's An Addict (or As Vince Sees It)* in 2018. And slotted in between is the currently best selling *An Atheists Twelve Steps to Self-improvement – To Accompany Any Program* which came out in 2012. They're all still in print on Amazon and Kindle.

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*It may also be worth a visit to [vincehawkins.com](http://vincehawkins.com) for those who haven't already been there.*

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