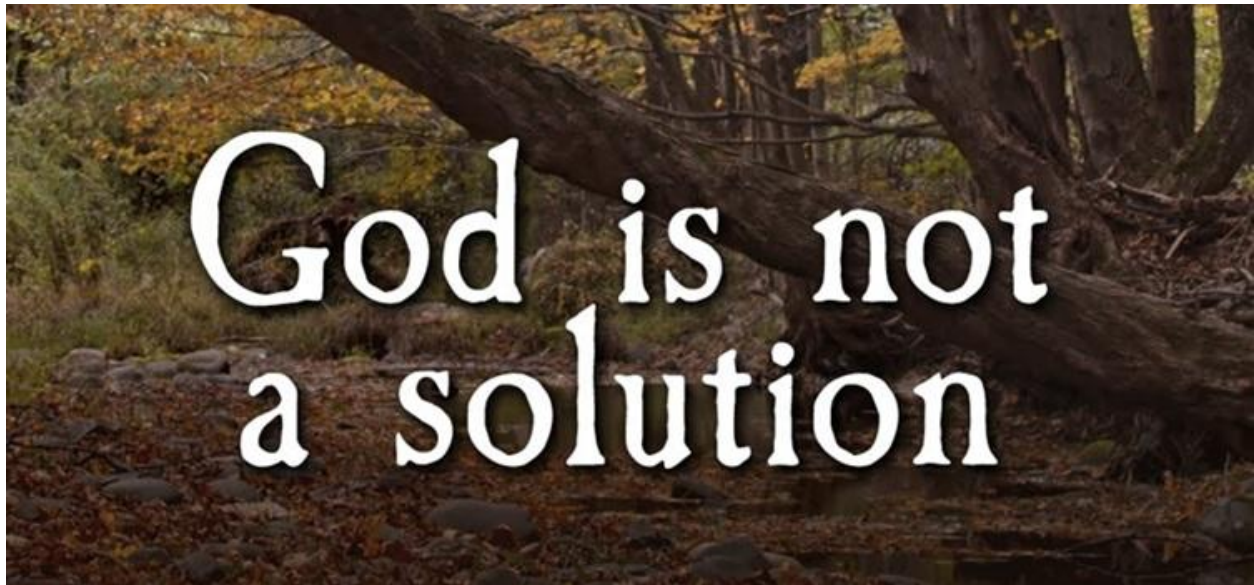


Switching from Addiction to God is Not a Solution



Why God beliefs, prayer, and forgiveness are not a solution to addiction—they make it worse.

By Richard Clark

Very few people accept that addiction is a mental illness. Addiction has predictable symptoms, both mental and social, and is about neglect and self-harm. One serious problem is addicts have been indoctrinated into believing they are defective people with bad characters. In my forty years of practise, it's been consistent that during addiction-related therapy it is particularly difficult for an addict to sincerely change their self-perception from 'I'm a bad person' to having a legitimate illness.

I ask you to take two things at face value. The first is that addiction is rooted in dysfunctional (broken) relationships. The second is to understand that there are two classes of symptoms: there's psychological symptoms and social symptoms. To understand that god-based recovery is less than spiritual I will focus on broken relationships and the social symptoms.

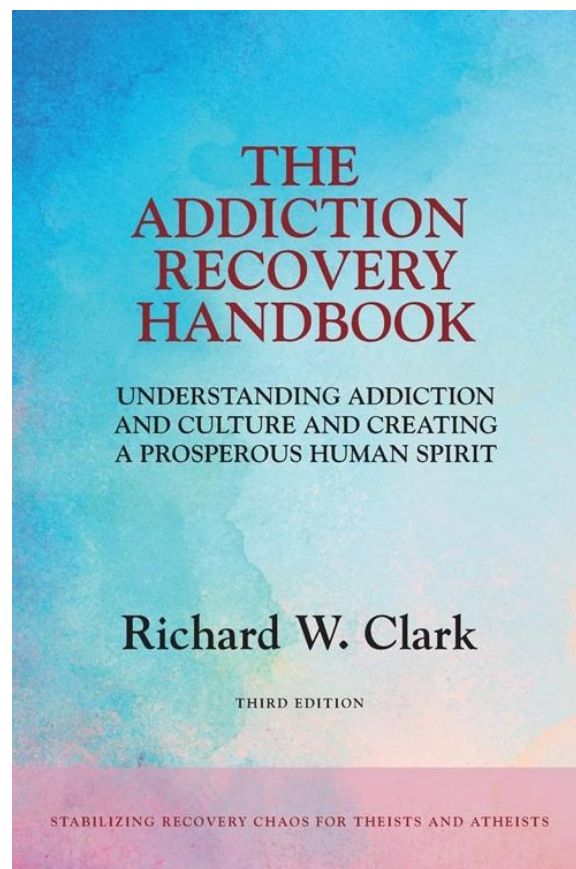
First: For addicts, broken or dysfunctional relationships exist at three levels: (i) a broken relationship in the addict's mind—the relationship within themselves towards themselves, (ii) broken relationships with people, and (iii) broken relationships with things: distractions, rituals or substances.

Second: Addicts display five social symptoms. 1 – negligent self-harm and harm to others, 2 – dishonesty and evasiveness, 3 – arrogance that conceals a deeper insecurity, 4 – selfishness and neglect of other people's rights or entitlements, 5 – irresponsible and defiant. Addicts live with these life conditions: broken relationships and harmful social symptoms.

The 1939 AA book *Alcoholics Anonymous* and its twelve-step solution revolved around a sinner's character defects and God. Bill Wilson's conviction that alcoholics are sinners and religion's interference in mental health is plainly evident. His presentation of illness gets two very brief references, and the religious views of sinner, flawed character, and weak faith are consistently prominent throughout the book and stories. Mr. Wilson's solution is indoctrination into Christianity

My view is any indoctrination into 'God-faith-prayer-forgiveness' or compliance with religious dogma is not a solution, it's a new problem. The only reliable solution is to ignore religion and, with guidance, voluntarily achieve a psychology of compassionate harmony. This is often glibly referred to as a spiritual lifestyle, but religion does not allow for a 'spiritual' lifestyle. The AA steps do not address illness, they address character defects and a faithless personality, which makes us sinners. The Christian view of 'recovery' is we need faith, redemption, and God's forgiveness.

Addicts live with broken relationships on three levels and have five general social symptoms. Granted, this is an over-simplified description of addiction, but it is accurate. For more information:



There exists a few basic claims and obvious beliefs within religious dogma. These are outlined in the right column in the chart that follows. Religions promote these beliefs (the right column) as true and are adamant their unproven speculations about God and sin and faith are true, sacred, and never to be questioned. Religion protects itself by insisting that anything bad said about religion is irreverent and in poor taste.

Here is a chart comparing active addiction (left) and religion (right).

The five social symptoms of addiction...

1. Self-harm and harm to others — the addict's determined commitment to self-destructive behavior and negligence towards others. This is harm, sometimes hate, or degradation towards oneself or others seen in the illness of addiction.

2. Dishonesty, lying, and manipulation of others are in the character of an addict from aspects of self-doubt, shame, guilt, cognitive dissonance, repetitive inadequacy. These internal mental symptoms require dishonesty or concealment.

3. Arrogance and hiding insecurity and anxiety. Arrogance is a concealment strategy addicts use to protect themselves from examination. Most often, in the face of 'demanding' and perceptive questions from others the addict has no reply to give so they resort to #5, defiance.

4. Selfishness and callousness in the way addicts avoid admitting past transgressions. They are evasive and indifferent to responsibility and the painful emotional experience of others—the avoidance of responsibility and compassion. Addiction justifies neglect.

The five beliefs and related behaviours of religion.

1. Self-harm and harm to others — repression and self-shame of sexuality; women believing they are spiritually less than men; promoting gender inequality; harshly judging oneself as a sinner, inadequate to meet God's laws, seeing oneself as a morally corrupt and doomed sinner. This is self-harm, repression, self-hate, or self-degradation.

2. Dishonesty, lying — strenuously denying that religion is speculation; presenting hell, heaven, God, or miracles as facts. This is dishonest. Manipulating interpretations to maintain control; dishonestly claiming to 'know' God's preferences; insisting that God exists. To insist that speculation and opinion are facts is dishonest and abusive to manipulate insecure people to claim these speculations are truths.

3. Arrogance and hiding insecurity: Righteously believing all other faiths or atheists and agnostics are wrong or weak: Arrogance. Never admitting the possibility of error or wrongdoing and ignoring transgressions and abuses: Righteousness. In the face of perceptive questions about truth, religious people resort to convoluted double talk that makes no sense and blame the questioners for having no faith.

4. Selfishness that their faith is the best belief system and that all other beliefs are deficient. It's calloused to insult others and insist any different opinion is by its very existence inferior. Righteousness. It's selfish and callous to insist their own brand of speculation is the superlative opinion and degrade, punish, or kill anyone who disagrees.

5. Addicts are irresponsible and defiant and complain (a lot) which are variations and shades of blaming. There's no accountability for lies, concealment or abuse. Addiction is a carefully orchestrated evasion of responsibility.

The three levels of relationship conflict in addiction:

Relationship Conflict – Internal — secretly believing they are defective or incompetent. Generally, addicts look down upon themselves and at some level believe they are bad and unworthy, a burden, and they “should know better.”

External Relationships with other people—there is relationship conflict that cannot be resolved or that the addict cannot protect themselves from. Other people are out to get them or are untrustworthy. Anger against self and others is common.

Broken Relationships in Rituals or behaviours. Self-degradation and harm within the addiction of choice: alcohol, drugs, sex, hunting for relationships, romance (ritual), shopping, spending, internet, work (distractions). All addicts have broken relationships with rituals, substances, or distractions.

5. Religion's irresponsibility is evasion and defiance to intelligent inquiry when we examine the long, confirmed history of abuse, torture, molestations, rape, persecution, violence and degradation citing that ‘Our opinion of the one true God is the only real one.’ This is religion's extreme evasion of irresponsibility and defiant callousness.

The three levels of relationship conflict in religion:

Relationship Conflict – Internal — Believing they are failures in the sight of God and inadequate sinners needing salvation and/or forgiveness from priests and God. Believers never measure up to some (vague) unattainable standard of faith; look down upon themselves and at some level believe they are bad.

External Relationships with other people. Everyone is a sinner. Atheists, agnostics, and those of other faiths are perverted and misdirected. Everyone else is misguided when compared to their own beliefs and their own projections of their God. Conflict and judgement exist between faiths (Jews vs. Christians vs. Muslims) and between different sects of any one faith.

Broken and abusive rituals: harm, degradation and conflict in rituals of prayer and worship, subservience, sinning, bad faith, being inadequate. There's intellectual conflict and doubt about theories like transubstantiation, chaos about tithing, sacrifice, myths about elaborate costumes, getting ‘all dressed up’ for worship (impression management), stentorian opinions expressed as fact are dishonest; expectations of rapture and reward in rituals and dogma, often leading to self-criticism about poor faith, and being a corrupt human—degrading and broken relationships with rituals, substances, or distractions.

Left Column: Addiction requires delusions about life, blaming, neurotic mental structures, dishonesty, destructive self-harm, irresponsibility, perpetual relationship conflict, dishonesty, criticizing and judging others, and harmful rituals. Right Colum: Religion requires speculation about God, faith, beliefs about miracles, the power of prayer, and self-deprecation to be accepted as facts. It fosters dishonesty and claims that everyone is inherently a sinner and must pray to they God they created for rescue from the problems created by the religion. Religion requires judging and condemning of others, obsessive rituals, being dishonest and arrogant, and demands God and ‘the church’ be more sacred than compassion or equality.

Be mindful of the few truths for atheists and agnostics from Bill Wilson’s book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*. Most of what’s in the book is decidedly religious and of no real merit in addressing addiction. Here are four truths that should be relied upon. 1 – Sobriety or legitimate abstinence is essential for recovery. 2 – Rigorous honesty is never an option. It’s so significant he explained its importance before he discussed God or the steps. 3 – Addicts must let go of old ideas, rationalizations and justifications. 4 – Criticizing and blaming (often concealed in complaining) is to be eliminated from speech and thought.

Upon reflection, religion encourages participation in self-deprecating rituals. Religion is dishonest when it insists that probable fictions and miracles are facts. It clings to old ideas from the dark ages, and religion criticizes and persecutes people of different beliefs. All rather unspiritual.

Browbeating anyone who is desperate, scared, confused, full of shame and guilt (meaning addicts) into committing to God, faith, prayer, and forgiveness, is a lateral switch from the left to the right column. Traditional AA thinks religion is better just because society thinks it’s better. Society also thinks that shopping and spending addictions, severe credit card debt, and obsessions with body image are acceptable.

In a seminar I once described religion as trying to force obedience by instilling guilt, making empty promises to its parishioners (the hostages), and threatening blackmail. Religion insists people are sinners from birth—everyone’s a hostage. The ransom demands are prayer, obedience to priests and dogma, submission, self-hate, faith, tithing. Meet religion’s ransom demands and religion will set you free, God will save you, help you get sober, grant you relief from suffering, and maybe even let you into heaven. But if you don’t agree to religion’s demands, you’ll remain a flawed sinner, God will be displeased, you’ll continue to act out in torment and probably go to hell. That’s blackmail.

Switching from addiction to religion is substituting the harmful and self-deprecating issues of addiction for the similar views of religion. But... if a person switches to religion society approves of that. A society that approves of religion gives us permission to be unspiritual.

A ‘spiritual lifestyle’ of self-respect, honesty, equality, compassion, responsibility is not available in addiction or religion. Recovery from addiction requires, at the very minimum, two things. The first is a divorce from the arrogance, conflict, self-deprecation, and authorized abuse that is religion. The second is attaining a responsible psychology specific to the illness of addiction that takes you into compassionate harmony. That’s when life gets reliably interesting.

Kind regards
Richard Clark

Richard Clark has been clean and sober since September 1980 and has always been open about his atheism. He is now sober 44 years with no relapses, active in his weekly agnostic meeting, and never concealed his atheism. Professionally, Richard has been a therapist in addictions work since 1985. For several decades he's been committed to the ancient Buddhist stream of Arhat consciousness and been recognized as a Pratyeka-buddha, pre-Theravada practise (and still working at it). He offers on-line private counselling sessions with clients from across Canada. Richard has written three books and is presently writing a fourth book detailing the psychology of Buddhism, the healthy psychology of atheism, and therapy for counsellors and addicts. There is more information about him at [Green Room Lectures](#).

