

AA, the courts, and religion



By Andy F.

An eye-opening encounter

Anyone who is familiar with my blogs will know that they are all about my experiences as an agnostic alcoholic in AA. Whenever I publish an article on my website, I also share it across various AA Facebook groups I belong to. Some people appreciate them, others don't. That's okay; if you put content in the public domain, you have to be prepared to get criticism, both good and bad.

Recently, however, I had an encounter with a member of an AA Facebook group. It raised some issues and questions that deserve further consideration. On reading my blog on some AA-related topic concerning my agnosticism, I was accosted by a woman who could only be described as a religious fundamentalist.

I was told that I was doing AA considerable harm by publishing any material about AA that gave people the impression that alcoholics could get sober without God. It didn't make any difference when I reminded her of AA's third tradition, that ***"The only requirement for AA membership is a desire to stop drinking."***

A fundamentalist perception

Against my better judgment, I engaged this member in a heated dialogue. A part of me knew that getting into an argument with a religious fundamentalist was a waste of time. Past

experience has shown me what a futile exercise it is trying to argue with a religious fundamentalist, but my ego got the better of me, and I couldn't resist.

She was quick and very proud to point out that the US courts had ruled that AA was a religious activity. She sent me the following link, which proved the fact:

“In the 1990s and 2000s, several high-profile cases (notably Griffin v. Coughlin in 1996 and Inouye v. Kemna in 2007) established that the state cannot mandate AA attendance for prisoners or parolees. The courts reached this conclusion by applying the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, thus ruling AA a religious entity.”
(Gemini AI)

With this as her trump card, she embarked on a further tirade. “It is only a matter of time,” she said, “before AA as a fellowship is assimilated into the church.” It will go back to its roots in the [Oxford group](#) and become part of an Evangelical Christian church. It struck me that I was not only dealing with a religious fundamentalist but a dangerous one. What will happen to the fellowship if this type of thinking becomes more established within it?

Bill Wilson – a sinner, womanizer, and a drug addict

I reminded her that Bill Wilson, the co-founder of AA, always intended the fellowship to be welcoming to every alcoholic regardless of their personal beliefs. No alcoholic who had a desire to stop drinking could be turned away.

Responsibility Is Our Theme

Newcomers are approaching AA at the rate of tens of thousands yearly. They represent almost every belief and attitude imaginable. We have atheists and agnostics. We have people of nearly every race, culture and religion. In AA we are supposed to be bound together in the kinship of a common suffering. 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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At this suggestion, she lost her temper and said that Bill Wilson's reputation and credibility as the co-founder of AA had long since been discredited. He was nothing more than a [womanizer](#) and a low-life drug addict. As a sinner, he had no business being associated with

AA, which was God's program. The supposed drug addiction of which she spoke was [Bill's short-term therapy with LSD](#), which he used to treat his depression.

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. To discredit a man who had given so much to AA, making it all inclusive to all sufferers regardless of race, colour, or creed, is that the sin here? I thought Christians advocated love, care, and forgiveness, not a character assassination. Sadly, I know that this woman isn't alone in this type of warped fundamentalist thinking.

Part of me regretted ever engaging with her. Another part found it necessary to make other AA members aware of the dangerous undercurrents undermining our legacy of unity, which has been the glue that has held AA together since its inception.

Has fundamentalism in AA influenced the US courts?

AA was founded in 1935. The US courts ruled AA a religious activity in 1996. This means that for 61 years, the courts were free to send alcoholics for treatment because AA was viewed as a secular health program. Not anymore. Because AA is now viewed as a religious activity by the courts in the US, alcoholics must now be either fined or go to prison. Moreover

“the state cannot mandate AA attendance for prisoners or parolees. The courts reached this conclusion by applying the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment.”
(Gemini AI)

How did this happen if for 61 years, AA enjoyed the freedom to operate in the United States as a secular health care program? Could the problem have come from within AA itself? Let's see what Gemini AI has to offer us on this question.

“The Role of “Fundamentalism” Within AA

While the courts focused on the foundational documents, there is an internal movement often called “Big Book Fundamentalism” (or groups like “Back to Basics”). These groups advocate for a strict, literal interpretation of the original 1939 text, often rejecting more secular or “cafeteria-style” interpretations.

The rise of this fundamentalism influenced the courts indirectly by:

** Increasing Conflict: As these groups insisted on the literal “God talk,” more atheist and agnostic members felt excluded. This led to more lawsuits from individuals who felt their secular beliefs were being violated by court-ordered attendance.*

** Evidence of Inflexibility: When courts evaluated if AA could be considered “secular,” the refusal of many groups to remove prayers or change the “God” language—often driven by traditionalist or fundamentalist members—made it impossible for judges to categorize AA as a purely secular health program.*

The courts didn't rule against AA because of a small group of fundamentalists; they ruled that AA's DNA is religious. However, the "fundamentalist" push within the fellowship to keep the program exactly as it was written in 1939 has ensured that the religious elements remain front-and-center, making it an easy target for First Amendment challenges."

Conclusion

The other day, I went to a meeting, and I'm sure it wasn't a coincidence: the topic was Tradition One: **"Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends on AA unity."**

This had always been my gripe with the fundamentalists. That they were undermining the unity of AA by aggressively imposing their ideas on other AA members. As the reading about Tradition One neared its end, suddenly a powerful thought struck me. *"Are you not violating Tradition One yourself by criticizing another AA member's interpretation of the program"?* It doesn't matter who started it. As AA members, the religious fundamentalists are entitled to their point of view. If their particular brand of AA keeps them sober, then who am I to tell them that they shouldn't be sharing it in AA

In the same way that **"The only requirement for AA membership is a desire to stop drinking"** (Tradition Three) applies to atheists, agnostics, and freethinkers, it cannot be denied that Tradition Three is also there to protect the religious fundamentalists, no matter how extreme their ideas.

What are your thoughts?

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, click here: <https://aafornagnostics.com/>. And, for a PDF of this article, click here: AA, the courts, and religion.
