

About AA

The A.A. Program — Spiritual But Never ‘Religious’

One of the most common misconceptions about Alcoholics Anonymous is that it is a religious organization. New members especially, confronted with A.A.’s emphasis on recovery from alcoholism by spiritual means, often translate “spiritual” as “religious” and shy away from meetings, avoiding what they perceive as a new and frightening set of beliefs. By the time they walk into their first meeting, many alcoholics have lost what faith they might once have possessed; others have tried religion to stop drinking and failed; still others simply want nothing to do with it. Yet with rare exceptions, once A.A. members achieve any length of sobriety, they have found a source of strength outside themselves — a Higher Power, by whatever name — and the stumbling block has disappeared.

A Program of Action

A.A.’s Twelve Steps, which constitute its program of recovery, are in no way a statement of belief; they simply describe what the founding members did to get sober and stay sober. They contain no new ideas: surrender, self-inventory, confession to someone outside ourselves, and some form of prayer and meditation are concepts found in spiritual movements throughout the world for thousands of years. What the Steps do is frame these principles for the suffering alcoholic — sick, frightened, defiant, and grimly determined not to be told what to do or think or believe.

The Steps offer a detailed plan of action: admit that alcohol has you beaten, clean up your own life, admit your faults and do whatever it takes to change them, maintain a relationship with whatever or whoever outside of yourself can help keep you sober, and work with other alcoholics.

‘God As We Understood Him’

The basic principles of Alcoholics Anonymous were worked out in the late 1930s and early ’40s, during what co-founder Bill W. often referred to as the Fellowship’s period of “trial and error.” The founding members had been using six steps borrowed from the Oxford Groups, where many of them started out. Bill felt that more specific instructions would be better, and in the course of writing A.A.’s basic text, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, he expanded them to twelve. But he was dealing with a group of newly sober drunks, and not surprisingly his new version met with spirited opposition. Even though the founding members were in many ways a homogeneous bunch (white, middle-class, almost exclusively male, and primarily Christian in background), they represented the full spectrum of opinion and belief. Bill tells us in *Alcoholic Anonymous Comes of Age*, a history of the Fellowship’s early years, that “the hot debate about the Twelve Steps and the book’s content was dou-

bled and redoubled. There were conservative, liberal, and radical viewpoints.” (page 162) Some thought the book ought to be Christian; others could accept the word “God” but were opposed to any other theological proposition. And the atheists and agnostics wanted to delete all references to God and take a psychological approach.

Bill concludes: “We finally began to talk about the possibility of compromise. . . . In Step Two we decided to describe God as a ‘Power greater than ourselves.’ In Steps Three and Eleven we inserted the words ‘*God as we understood Him.*’ From Step Seven we deleted the words ‘on our knees.’ And, as a lead-in sentence to all the steps we wrote these words: ‘Here are the steps we took, which are suggested as a program of recovery.’ A.A.’s Twelve Steps were to be *suggestions* only.” (*ibid.*, page 167)

More than sixty years later, those crucial compromises, articulated after weeks of heated controversy, have made it possible for alcoholics of all faiths, or no faith at all, to embrace the A.A. program of recovery and find lasting sobriety.

What About This Spiritual Awakening Thing?

Nevertheless, the phrase “spiritual awakening,” found in the Twelfth Step and throughout A.A. literature, remains daunting to many beginners. For some, it conjures up a dramatic “conversion” experience — not an appealing idea to an alcoholic just coming off a drunk. To others, beaten down by years of steady drinking, it seems completely out of reach. But for those who persevere, ongoing sobriety almost invariably brings the realization that — in some wonderful and unexpected way — they have indeed experienced a spiritual change.

Spirituality, A.A. style, is the result of action. Step Twelve begins, “Having had a spiritual awakening *as the result of these Steps. . .*” (italics added), and in the book *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (page 106), Bill W. describes what happens: “Maybe there are as many definitions of spiritual awakening as there are people who have had them. But certainly each genuine one has something in common with all the others. . . . When a man or woman has a spiritual awakening, the most important meaning of it is that he has now become able to do, feel, and believe that which he could not do before on his unaided strength and resources alone. He has been granted a gift which amounts to a new state of consciousness and being. He has been set on a path which tells him he is really going somewhere, that life is not a dead end, not something to be endured or mastered. In a very real sense he has been transformed, because he has laid hold of a source of strength which, in one way or another, he had hitherto denied himself.”

Groups and Their Customs

If the Steps are the program of recovery, the A.A. group is where alcoholics learn to live the program and practice it “in all their affairs.” Virtually all group meetings in the U.S. and Canada begin with a reading of the A.A. Preamble, a brief description of what the Fellowship is and is not. Its last two sentences make it clear that A.A.’s purpose has nothing to do with religion: “A.A. is not allied with any sect, denomination, politics, organization or institution; does not wish to engage in any controversy; neither endorses nor opposes any causes. Our primary purpose is to stay sober and help other alcoholics to achieve sobriety.”

Group customs that appear to be religious sometimes discourage new people from coming back. Professionals who refer people to A.A. may help by advising them to attend a variety of meetings, especially in the first year of sobriety, and to find a home group where they are comfortable. According to A.A.’s Fourth Tradition, each group is autonomous, which means in practical terms that every group is unique, with a flavor all its own. Thus, even if a shaky alcoholic finds himself one night in a meeting where the members feel at home with traditional religious language, he or she can try again the next night and find a group where even the most doubting or cynical soul will fit right in.

Similarly, A.A. members generally deal with the question of a Higher Power by assuring new members that they are free to find their own. Men and women who shy away from what is known in A.A. vernacular as the “God bit” can still identify a much-needed source of support outside themselves. For some, it is their A.A. group; others eventually choose a traditional idea of God, while still others rely upon an entirely different concept of a higher power. To show the variety of spiritual searches in A.A. the booklet *Came to Believe* was published in 1973. It is a collection of the various spiritual experiences of a wide range of members, from adherents of traditional religion to atheists and agnostics, with all stops in between.

But Don’t A.A. Groups Use the Lord’s Prayer?

The practice of ending meetings with the Lord’s Prayer, once almost universal, is still common in many areas. Where it still exists, the leader normally asks attendees to join in only if they choose to. North American groups today have found a variety of ways to close their meetings. Use of the Lord’s Prayer is rare in Spanish groups in the U.S. and groups outside the United States. Many recite the Serenity Prayer or A.A.’s Responsibility Statement; others use some other informal prayer or phrasing, or simply a moment of silence. And whatever the specific wording, the group conscience makes the decision.

Groups that continue to close with the Lord’s Prayer are following a custom established in the Fellowship’s earliest days, when many of the founding members found their support in meetings of the Oxford Groups. The practice of closing with the Lord’s Prayer very likely came directly from those meetings. At the time, there was no A.A. literature, and so the founders leaned heavily on Bible readings for inspiration and guidance. They probably closed with the Lord’s Prayer because, as Bill W. explained, “it did not put speakers to the task, embarrassing to many, of composing prayers of their own.” Meeting formats became more inclusive once A.A. began to spread throughout North America and then the rest of the

world, and it became obvious that the program of recovery could cross all barriers of creed, race, and religion.

In *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, the Rev. Samuel Shoemaker, one of the nonalcoholic friends who was instrumental in shaping the Fellowship in the very beginning, reflects on the founders’ fundamental decision not to define a set of beliefs. He says (pages 263-64): “A.A. has been supremely wise, I think, in emphasizing the reality of the experience, and acknowledging that it came from a higher Power than human, and leaving the interpretation part pretty much at that. . . . If A.A.’s had said more, some people would have wanted them to say a great deal more, and define God in a way acceptable and congenial to themselves. It would have taken only two or three groups like this, dissenting from one another, to wreck the whole business. . . . So they stuck to the inescapable experiences and told people to turn their wills and their lives over to the care of God *as they understood Him*. That left the theory and the theology. . . to the churches to which people belong. If they belonged to no church and could hold no consistent theory, then they had to give themselves to the God that they saw in other people. That’s not a bad way to set in motion the beginnings of a spiritual experience.”

Health Care Workers From Azerbaijan Drop in on A.A.

In June, health care professionals from Azerbaijan were welcomed by members of the A.A. General Service Office staff. Situated just north of Iran, Azerbaijan, has a predominantly Muslim population of about 7.5 million. The ten-member delegation was in the U.S. to find out more about harm reduction in the treatment of AIDS and alcoholism. At the suggestion of the U.S. State Department, they made a stop at G.S.O. after their training in Kansas City, MO, where they also visited a local A.A. office and attended an open meeting.

The visitors asked questions through an interpreter about A.A. in Muslim countries, the role of women in the program, and the principle of self-support. They left with literature in Russian, and said they plan to be in touch about translation of the literature into Azeri, the country’s official language.

Nonalcoholic professionals have been the catalysts for helping to get A.A. started in many communities around the world, and A.A. is hopeful that this meeting might provide a vehicle for offering A.A.’s message of hope and recovery to suffering alcoholics in Azerbaijan.

Let Us Hear From You . . .

Are there any specific topics or professions that you would like to see explored in *About A.A.*? Please send us your thoughts, ideas, comments, so we may better communicate with the professional community. You may also e-mail the Cooperation With the Professional Community desk at: cpc@aa.org.

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