

About AA

We Tread Innumerable Paths: Spirituality in A.A.

One of the most common misconceptions about Alcoholics Anonymous is that it is a religious organization. New and prospective members in particular, when 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.

Given the references to God and a "Higher Power" that appear in A.A.'s Twelve Steps and throughout the broad array of A.A. literature, it's no surprise that people initially judge the program to be religious. Since A.A. groups often rent space in churches, attending an A.A. meeting in a church basement can reinforce that impression and the possibility of hearing a prayer at the end of a meeting can further cement the idea.

However, A.A.'s pioneering members realized from the beginning that their sole purpose was to help people gain sobriety—not to convert them to any form of religion, and they went to great lengths to ensure the broadest membership among all who suffered from alcoholism, regardless of race, religion, political or economic standing. In the words of the A.A. Preamble, a cogent description of A.A. that is often read at the beginning of A.A. meetings: "The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking."

In addition, the Preamble's final two sentences make it clear that A.A. is not affiliated with any 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."

We Tread Innumerable Paths

A.A. is embraced by members of many religions and it has been proven over the years that A.A. members tread innumerable paths in their quest for sobriety and the spiritual awakening articulated in the Fellowship's Twelfth Step. When it comes to questions of God or a "Higher Power," most A.A. members deal with this potential sticking point by simply assuring new members that they are free to find their own. Belief in any particular conception of God is not necessary in A.A., and, as Bill W., A.A.'s co-founder, explained, "We have no desire to convince anyone that there is only one way by which faith can be acquired. All of us, whatever our race, creed, or color, are the children of a living Creator, with whom we may form a relationship upon simple and understandable terms as soon as we are willing and honest enough to try.... We think it no concern of ours what religious bodies our members associate themselves with as individuals. This should be an entirely personal affair which each one decides for himself in the light of past associations or his present choice."

To highlight the variety of spiritual searches and experiences of its members, the A.A. booklet *Came to Believe* was published in 1973, a collection of the various spiritual experiences of a wide range of members who found lasting sobriety in A.A., from adherents of traditional religion to atheists and agnostics, with all steps in between.

Keeping the Gateway Open

A.A.'s pioneers quickly saw that religion was an element that could split them apart, and, while acknowledging the debt to the religious world that many of them owed, they were careful not to present the program in religious terms. While much of A.A.'s early membership was drawn from the ranks of America's predominantly white, middle-class, church-going population of the time, there were also a number of atheists and agnostics whose resistance to religion helped steer the fledgling fellowship's collective conscience toward an inclusive approach and away from any specifically religious perspective.

Bill W., describing the development of A.A.'s principal text, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, noted, "When the Big Book was being planned, some members thought that it ought to be Christian in the doctrinal sense. Others had no objection to the use of the word 'God,' but wanted to avoid doctrinal issues. Spirituality, yes. Religion, no. Still others wanted a psychological book, to lure the alcoholic in. Once in, he could take God or leave Him alone as he wished.

"To the rest of us this was shocking, but happily we listened. Our group conscience was at work to construct the most acceptable and effective book possible.

"Every voice was playing its appointed part. Our atheists and agnostics widened our gateway so that all who suffer might pass through, regardless of their belief or lack of belief."

'I've Come a Long Way'

"Since taking the first step into the program," an A.A. member from Muscatine, Iowa shared in the A.A. Grapevine, the Fellowship's member-supported monthly magazine, "I've come a long way about knowing and believing in a Higher Power.... I was like any other atheist or agnostic who had had experiences with religion and didn't want anything to do with God. How could there be a God when there was such hate and destruction in the world? I carried these doubts in the back of my mind. For fifteen years I opposed all the morals and values that I'd learned. Religion, church, and God were not at all a part of my life.... Oh, there were times when shame and guilt would overcome me and I'd repent, hoping for 'salvation,' only to slide back down again. By the time I entered the program of A.A.

I didn't believe in any religious or spiritual aspect of God at all, and thought there was nothing that would change my mind. But there did come a change when I learned the difference between religion and spirituality.

"I came to realize that being religious was being committed to a practice of belief and being spiritual was actively living life through a life-giving force—God. What a concept! But who is God? I believe it is any power greater than myself that I have come to know as my own, through my own understanding.... I could call this power anything I choose—whether it be God, Allah, Higher Power, Creative Intelligence, or a power of good. I could choose anything to be that Higher Power—a home group, electricity, an ocean—as long as it is of my own understanding, a personal life-giving force to help me live life on life's terms, one day at a time. There is no right or wrong path to spirituality. It is each person's choice.

"I've learned so much about having spirituality in my life. I have learned to accept people, trust others, accept responsibility for my own attitudes and behaviors, live for today... I don't have a specific religious faith that I practice or church that I go to. Matter of fact, I haven't been in a sanctuary for quite some time. But I do try to follow and practice the principles of the A.A. program, which lead to spirituality. Through this I believe that my Higher Power lives within and through me, and that is my sanctuary."

'God As We Understood Him'

"The phrase 'God As We Understood Him' is perhaps the most important expression to be found in our whole A.A. vocabulary," wrote Bill W. "Within the compass of these five significant words there can be included every kind and degree of faith, together with the positive assurance that each of us may choose his own. Scarcely less valuable to us are those supplemental expressions—'A Higher Power' and 'A Power Greater Than Ourselves.' For all who deny, or seriously doubt a deity, these frame an open door over whose threshold the unbeliever can take his first easy step into a reality hitherto unknown to him—the realm of faith."

People from other traditions echo this insight. "Alcoholics Anonymous is not a religion and cannot take the place of religion," writes Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski in "Spirituality, Prayer, the Twelve Steps and Judaism." The rest of his essay presents Jewish teachings that resonate with each of the Twelve Steps.

Dr. Samuel Shoemaker, who was the innovative and energetic rector of Calvary Church in New York City, said, "The Twelve Steps are one of the very great summaries and organic collections of spiritual truth known to history. They have an almost universal relevance."

In support of this idea, Bill W. related a story in *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age* (page 81) about a letter that had been received at A.A.'s General Service Office: "A minister in Thailand wrote, 'We took A.A.'s Twelve Steps to the largest Buddhist monastery in this province, and the head priest said, 'Why, these Steps are fine! For us as Buddhists, it might be slightly more acceptable if you had inserted the word 'good' in your Steps instead of 'God.' Nevertheless, you say that it is God as you understand Him, and that must certainly include the good. Yes, A.A.'s Twelve Steps will surely be accepted by the Buddhists around here.'"

Our Friends Recommend Us

Over the years, A.A. has had many friends in the world of religion, as it has in the worlds of medicine, psychiatry and business. Among such friends was Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick, pastor of New York

City's Riverside Church, a man whose face graced the cover of *Time* magazine in October of 1930. In the book *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age* (page 324), Dr. Fosdick said of A.A., "The meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous are the only place, so far as I know, where Roman Catholics, Jews, all kinds of Protestants, and even agnostics get together harmoniously.... They do not talk theology. Many of them would say that they know nothing about it. What they do know is that in their utter helplessness they were introduced to a Power, greater than themselves, in contact with whom they found a strong resource which made possible a victory that seemed incredible. I have listened to many learned arguments about God, but for honest-to-goodness experiential evidence of God, His power personally appropriated and His reality indubitably assured, give me a good meeting of A.A.!"

Board Selects New Chairperson

In April 2009, The Very Rev. Ward Ewing, D.D., dean and president of the General Theological Seminary in New York City, became chairperson of A.A.'s General Service Board. He is one of seven nonalcoholics from a variety of professional backgrounds who serve the General Service Board. The other 14 members are alcoholics and members of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Rev. Ewing has been involved in the A.A. service structure since his selection in 2004 as a Class A (nonalcoholic) trustee, and replaces outgoing chairperson Leonard Blumenthal, L.L.D. (nonalcoholic).

He became interested in A.A. and alcoholism, he says, while serving as vicar of St. Peter's-in-the-Valley, Louisville, Kentucky, in 1975. "First I became aware of alcoholism as a disease, then I began attending seminars on alcoholism and took a full semester course on alcoholism." Combined with the awareness of A.A. that he was gaining on a first-hand basis from members of his parish who were recovering alcoholics, Ward developed a support group where persons in recovery could meet on a weekly basis to talk about religious and spiritual issues in their lives.

"Consequently," he says, "I began to incorporate the Twelve Steps into my own life and my own spirituality in a real way."

Noting that he brings no denominational allegiance to his new A.A. position, Ward says, "I recognize the life and death nature of alcoholism and am comfortable with the diversity of understandings of God we have in the Fellowship. I am excited to serve the Fellowship as a whole, and to stay focused on the basic mission of Alcoholics Anonymous."

A.A. To Celebrate 75 Years

Every five years since 1950, A.A. has celebrated its founding with an International Convention. The next celebration, honoring 75 years of Alcoholics Anonymous, will take place in San Antonio, Texas, July 1-4, 2010. The theme of the 2010 International Convention will be "A Vision for You." For information, visit www.aa.org or contact the General Service Office, Box 459, Grand Central Station, New York, NY 10163. (212) 870-3400.

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