

AA Agnostica and the Varieties of AA Experience **Ernie Kurtz and William White**

On June 15, 2014, AA Agnostica marked its third anniversary. As historians dedicated to documenting the growing varieties of addiction recovery experience, it is fitting that we take a moment to acknowledge this milestone within the history of Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) and the larger history of recovery.

A.A. and other Twelve Step organizations exist today within a growing menu of spiritual, religious and secular addiction recovery mutual aid organizations (MAOs). Secular MAOs include Women for Sobriety, Secular Organizations for Sobriety, SMART Recovery and LifeRing Secular Recovery. Religious MAOs include Alcoholics Victorious, Celebrate Recovery and Millati Islami.

Strains related to questions of religious belief, or the lack of such belief, are deeply rooted in the history of A.A., and those strains have recently heightened. While “spiritual but not religious” is a common self-descriptor of A.A., the degree of overt religiosity found within A.A. meetings varies considerably by country, region, city and from group to group. There have been efforts by some within A.A. to Christianize A.A. history and practices, and there have been simultaneous efforts to forge more tolerant space for agnostics and atheists within A.A. Each trend has been sometimes castigated by alarmists as a sign of the corruption and impending downfall of A.A.

We view such diversification within A.A. as an inevitable process of adaptation to the increasingly diverse religious and cultural contexts inherent within A.A.’s worldwide growth. It also reflects adaptation to the forces of religious diversification and secularization in the United States. The future growth and vibrancy of A.A. may well hinge on these adaptive capacities. It remains to be seen whether such adaptations will nurture and celebrate the growing diversity within A.A., or whether A.A. boundaries will be reactively tightened to trigger group schisms, member attrition, and flight to existing or new secular and religious alternatives to A.A. Historically significant is AA Agnostica’s efforts to forge a secularized framework of recovery within A.A.

We encourage all—A.A. enthusiasts, A.A. critics, addiction professionals, and persons exploring alternative recovery support options--to investigate AA Agnostica. Several resources are available to facilitate such investigations. Roger C. has prepared an informative [History of AA Agnostic Groups](#). A.A. Agnostica has recently published the book, [Don’t Tell: Stories and Essays by Agnostic and Atheists in AA](#). This book provides an informative window into the experiences of atheists, agnostics, secular humanists, and freethinkers using A.A. as a program of recovery from alcoholism. The [AA Agnostica website](#) contains more than [60 posted blogs](#) and a [Chat Room](#) for online mutual support. Also of interest is *The Little Book*, a collection of [alternative Twelve Steps](#) adapted for use by those seeking a non-theistic framework of addiction recovery.

A.A.’s institutional response to AA Agnostica is yet unclear, but it will influence the future growth of A.A. and other recovery-focused MAOs. The open acceptance of non-theists within the umbrella of A.A. and tolerance of adaptations of AA program practices to accommodate such

members could provide a potential window of international growth for A.A. (A [2010 Pew Research Center report](#) of more than 200 countries estimates that 16.3% of the world's population is religiously unaffiliated and that only 31.5% of world citizens are Christian in their religious orientation. The [2012 U.S. census](#) notes a 23% growth in the U.S. population between 1990 and 2008, but a 42% increase in the number of U.S. adults reporting no religious affiliation. [The Pew Research report](#) notes that one-fifth of the U.S. public – and a third of adults under 30 – are religiously unaffiliated.) But any secularization of A.A. could also provoke schisms that could push the more radical Christian wing within A.A. into alternative groups such as Alcoholics Victorious, Celebrate Recovery or into their own reform movements akin to the recent [Back to Basics](#) movement within A.A.

The challenge internationally and in the U.S. as we see it is for A.A. to adapt to both religious renewal movements and simultaneous trends of cultural secularization without losing its essential character. The question is whether A.A. traditions governing membership (“a desire to stop drinking”) will take precedent over its “suggested” steps as first published in 1939. Other related resources of interest include:

A Directory of AA Agnostic Meetings
<http://www.agnosticanyc.org/worldwide.html>

Information on Alcoholics Anonymous for Atheists and Agnostics (AAAA)
<http://lf.org/aaa/aaa.pdf>

Information on We Agnostics and Freethinkers 2014 International AA Convention
<http://waftiaac.org/authors/>

AA Groups are fundamentally little bands of people who are friends, who can help each other stay sober. Each group therefore reflects the needs of its own members. The way a group is managed is the way its members want it to be managed for their common benefit.

As a result we have large groups, small groups, groups which have refreshments, groups which like long meetings, groups which like short meetings, social groups, working groups, men's groups, women's groups, groups that play cards, groups which specialize in young people and as many other varieties as there are kinds of people. Each group has its own customs, its own financial problems and its own method of operation.

As long as it follows as a group the same principles AA recommends for individuals on selfishness, honesty, decency and tolerance it is above criticism.

AA in Cleveland – 1946

Reflections: Ernie Kurtz on the History of AA