

White, W. L. (2012). Agnostics groups in Alcoholics Anonymous: An interview with Roger C. Posted at www.williamwhitepapers.com

Agnostics Groups in Alcoholics Anonymous: An Interview with Roger C.

William L. White, MA

Introduction

Some years ago, the noted historian Ernest Kurtz, author of *Not-God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous*, shared with me that if he was to ever write another book about AA, its title would be *Varieties of AA Experience*. In the years that followed, Ernie and I delved into the varieties of recovery experience both within AA and within its secular and religious alternatives. One branch of such varieties that has always been of interest to me is the experiences of atheists and agnostics in AA and the development of agnostic groups in AA. In July of 2011, I began communicating with Roger C., a member of the We Agnostics AA group in Toronto, Canada, who was writing a history of agnostic groups in AA (see *The History of Agnostic Groups in AA* posted on this site). Roger has done an excellent job of pulling together the strains of this history, and in August of 2012, agreed to an interview to discuss his research.

Bill White: Roger, describe the roots of your interest in agnostics' participation in AA.

Roger C.: I am a recovering alcoholic in AA and an agnostic myself, and I have a Master's degree in Religious Studies from McGill. While working on my PhD, for a period of three or four years, I taught ordinands, people preparing for the ministry in the United, Anglican, or Presbyterian Church. I was the resident atheist at McGill, and I was very well regarded in that role. That was certainly not the case when I entered the rooms of AA. There were days I thought some of the AA members were trying to kill me with their bullying—passive-aggressive, but bullying nonetheless—about God. I frankly wasn't sure I could make it. About four months into sobriety, I stumbled across a Beyond Belief meeting, an agnostic AA meeting in Toronto. At the time, the group was on the online AA meeting list. My reaction after the meeting was complete relief. I thought to myself "I'm saved!"

Bill White: How did you go from that initial experience of relief to your commitment to researching and writing *A History of Agnostic Groups in AA*?

Roger C.: At the end of May 2011 when the two Toronto Groups got booted off the GTA regional list of AA meetings and out of Intergroup, I thought it would be useful to see how agnostic groups in AA had fared in the past, how they had been accepted or not within AA, and write a short history. I thought it would take a weekend, a long weekend maybe, and that I would find all the stuff I needed on the Internet and copy and paste my way to a full history. In fact, it took three months and was very hard work. Virtually everything in the history is original. The many archive offices in AA were of no help whatsoever. The Chief Archivist at the GSO genuinely wanted to assist, but her office also had very little information, at least about agnostics and atheists. There was also very little online or anywhere else about the history of agnostics in AA, and no one had ever undertaken to write such a history.

It became clear to me that agnostics and atheists in AA were a bit of a secret, certainly something that wasn't supposed to be treated seriously or officially acknowledged. This state of affairs would eventually inspire me to write my favorite blog ever, "[The Don't Tell Policy in AA](#)," in which I compare the treatment of agnostics and atheists in AA to the treatment of gays in the U.S. military, as a consequence of the Don't Ask, Don't Tell Policy.

Bill White: How did you respond to the challenges of this research?

Roger C.: The harder it was to write, the more determined I was to write it. It was intriguing and fascinating. I got to talk to some wonderful people, like Charlie P., the founder of the first We Agnostic meetings in LA in 1980. It became so inspiring to write this work. And I also discovered that something that occurred in the past isn't history—nobody who wasn't there will ever know it happened—until someone writes it down on paper. So, I like to think I made history, so to speak.

Bill White: Roger, could you summarize some of the major conclusions you drew from your research?

Roger C.: First, there is plenty of room in AA for atheists and agnostics; all we have to do is claim it as our own. Second, there are a lot of unfortunate misunderstandings out there about AA, and that's especially true within AA. What is AA? AA is one alcoholic helping another. Period. Full stop. It's what Bill did with Dr. Bob between May 12th and June 10th, 1935. AA has somehow morphed in people's minds into the 12-Step program. AA is not the 12 Steps, which are only "suggested" as a recovery program, just like the Big Book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, says. Do them, don't do them. Interpret them and rewrite them. Do something else to stay sober. It's up to the recovering alcoholic in AA to make up his or her mind. Make an effort to stay sober: have a desire to stop drinking, as it's put in Tradition Three, and you are a member, or a group, in good standing in AA. There is much more that is not well understood in today's AA about AA, but that is hardly within the scope of this interview. However, it all points to a final major conclusion to be drawn from *A History of Agnostic Groups in AA*: agnostics and atheists in AA need a voice. They need to be heard. It is apparently difficult for anyone with a religious orientation to understand the difference between attraction and promotion, as described in Tradition Eleven. Many will take up as much space as they think is available to them, and some now think they have a lien on the rooms of AA. Thus the website, [AA Agnostica](#). But more on the website later.

Bill White: Are there any recent updates on the events catalogued in the paper?

Roger C.: Back in 2011, of course, the GTA Intergroup booted two agnostic groups—Beyond Belief and We Agnostics—off the official regional AA meeting list and out of its monthly meetings. That decision has been reviewed since and, unfortunately, confirmed. In a fellowship that has no rules, the GTA Intergroup thought it wise to invent a rule just in case recovering alcoholics decided in the future to form AA agnostic groups. In March 2012, there was a motion that an AA group needs to adopt the 12 Steps, 12 Traditions, and 12 Concepts of AA in order to be recognized as an AA group by Intergroup.

The motion was put to a so-called "referendum" and the results announced in June. The final tally was 832 for the Motion and 286 against. (Out of the 330 groups in the GTA, 72 voted, and the tally reflects the number of members in each group present for the business meetings in which the vote was held.) So there is now a rule regarding who can belong to AA in the Greater Toronto Area. One could

certainly argue that Intergroup ought to boot itself out of itself because the rule is clearly a violation of several AA traditions.

It immediately reminds me of a quote from Bill, way back in 1946, reflecting on roughly ten years of AA experience:

The way our “worthy” alcoholics have sometimes tried to judge the “less worthy” is, as we look back on it, rather comical. Imagine if you can, one alcoholic judging another. At one time or another most A.A. groups go on rule-making benders... Gossips gossip and righteously denounce the local Wolves and Red Riding Hoods. Newcomers argue that they aren’t alcoholics at all, but keep coming around anyway... Others refuse to accept all the Twelve Steps of the recovery program. Some go still further, saying that the “God business” is bunk and quite unnecessary. Under these conditions our conservative program-abiding members get scared. These appalling conditions must be controlled, they think, else A.A. will surely go to rack and ruin.

Bill concludes, as at least some of us in AA know:

Our A.A. door stands wide open, (We) sign nothing, agree to nothing, and promise nothing. We demand nothing. (We) join on our own say-so. Nowadays, in most groups, (we) can join A.A. on the mere suspicion that (we) may be alcoholic... We do not wish to deny anyone the chance to recover from alcoholism.

The GTA Intergroup is misguided. Somewhere in the not too distant future, this silliness will be addressed and corrected. In the meantime, of course, we agnostics are actually not too upset. Indeed, some agnostics were inspired by Intergroup’s behaviour to start their own AA groups. Certainly no real new damage has been done. Indeed, maybe it’s just as well that this long-festering wound in AA has finally been exposed. Besides, we all seem to agree with the co-founder of AA that “every group has the right to be wrong,” including the GTA Intergroup.

Bill White: What has been the response to *A History of Agnostic Groups in AA* and the related papers on the website?

Roger C.: There is a slogan in AA that a lot of agnostics didn’t understand until *A History of Agnostic Groups in AA*: “You are not alone.” In that sense, it has been very liberating, very inspiring for many people who frankly did not feel that comfortable in the rooms of AA. The history and the response to it made it abundantly clear that agnostics in AA needed a voice, a forum to share “our experience, strength and hope,” as it were. The most important result of the history to date is the AA Agnostica website (<http://aaagnostica.org/>), an international forum for agnostics in AA, and a true archive for all that pertains to our place and history in AA.

I offer an example here of how the history and the website, AA Agnostica, work together to support the recovering alcoholic who may happen to be a bit short on belief in a deity. Misguided as it may be, there are those who will tell the newcomer in the rooms of AA that he or she has to find God in order to maintain his or her sobriety. *A History of Agnostics in AA* tells the story of a wonderful man who co-founded the very first AA group ever to be called “We Agnostics” in 1980 in Los Angeles. At the time, Charlie P. was 66 years old and had been sober for 9 years. He would go on to found another We Agnostics meeting in Austin in 2001. Today, there are six AA meetings for atheists, agnostics, and

freethinkers in Austin, no doubt inspired by Charlie P. All of that story was told in the first version of *A History of We Agnostics in AA*.

In March of this year [2012], a very moving eulogy was posted on AA Agnostica: *Father of We Agnostics Dies*. It was a wonderful tribute—written by one of his many sponsees—to Charlie P. who had lived another 32 years after founding the first We Agnostics AA meeting in LA. He was 98 years old. He had been sober for 41 continuous years. An AA meeting had been held in his room to celebrate his anniversary. In the last weeks before his death, AA meetings had been held at his bedside. Tributes were held for this wonderful man by AAers in both Austin and Hollywood.

To date, the tribute to Charlie remains one of the most popular posts on the AA Agnostica website. Why do people read it? Because it is an inspiration. Because it allows them to hear someone say that an interventionist God is required to stay sober and understand that that is utter nonsense. And the history is full of stories like that: Ada and John and David who started the We Atheists meeting in New York City in 1986... And on and on...

Bill White: Roger, describe the further development of the AA Agnostica website.

Roger C.: We have seen a new post every week! In its first year, forty-six articles were published, written by twenty-two different people from two continents (Europe and North America), and over a dozen cities such as London (England), New York, Toronto, Minneapolis, Austin, and Los Angeles. It turns out it's not just the odd agnostic here and there who manages to stay sober in AA, but a whole army! A whole world of recovering agnostic men and women in AA!

The response to the history and the website reveals a sentiment well-known in AA: gratitude. People are grateful for both. There is a responsibility declaration in AA: "When anyone anywhere reaches out for help, I want the hand of AA always to be there, and for that I am responsible." Agnostics in AA do not place qualifications on a person's access to AA: all are truly welcome in spite of their belief or lack of belief. Our only wish is to ensure suffering alcoholics can find sobriety in AA without having to accept anyone else's beliefs, or having to deny their own. Unless you are a truly troubled human being, it's hard not to respect that, and that's how most respond to the history and website.

Bill White: What suggestions would you offer to agnostics and atheists seeking recovery mutual aid support?

Roger C.: Given my background in Religious Studies at McGill, my first suggestion to atheists and agnostics in AA is biblical: Go Forth and Multiply! And that's been happening. Since the two groups [in Toronto] were booted out by Intergroup back in May 2011, the number of agnostic groups in Canada has gone from two to five. Not that many yet, but the trend is in place. AA is self-correcting. If agnostics and atheists don't feel comfortable in some of the rooms of AA, that's understandable. But change is inevitable. AA is for all with a "desire to stop drinking."

Having said that, it's also important to state that an alcoholic should do whatever is necessary for her or him to get sober and to maintain that sobriety. An alcoholic is powerless over alcohol, but not over his or her own choices and decisions as to how to best take care of himself or herself. We all have "concurrent" problems. In the most recent survey of AA members, over sixty percent access resources outside of AA in order to manage their lives in sobriety. Nobody should ever be told that there is only one way that works to recover from alcoholism. If the 12-Step recovery program is helpful, that's all well and good. If the Eightfold Path of Buddhism works better for an individual, then that person should do the Eightfold Path.

We agnostics are here to help in AA. We certainly believe in mutual aid support, of course, and that's why we are members of AA. I don't know how often I have heard someone new to an agnostic AA meeting say that the agnostic meetings are "more spiritual" than more traditional AA meetings. I don't know what "spiritual" means, but the sharing at these meetings is often very honest, very personal, and very moving. I love those meetings. I need those meetings. Mutual aid support is an essential element of recovery. It's the sharing circle. It's being in a room with someone who knows what you're talking about and doesn't hate you for it. "One alcoholic helping another," may not be absolutely essential to recovery from alcoholism, but as far as I can tell, it's as close as it gets.

Finally, I am always impressed with how tolerant agnostics and atheists can often be toward others, including those of a religious persuasion, and that's exactly how it should be. The religiously inclined, of course, have a right to their beliefs as well. I mentioned the We Atheists meeting that was founded in 1986 in New York. I think it's appropriate to end this interview with a principle that is, at least in my opinion, central to AA, but which sometimes proves to be elusive, and not just in Toronto. It's the slogan the atheists used in New York to end each and every one of their meetings: "Live and Let Live!"

Bill White: Roger, thank you for all you have done to unearth this hidden history of agnostics in AA and all you and AA Agnostics are doing to widen the doorways of entry into recovery.

Acknowledgement: Support for this interview series is provided by the Great Lakes Addiction Technology Transfer Center (ATTC) through a cooperative agreement from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (CSAT). The opinions expressed herein are the view of the authors and do not reflect the official position of the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), SAMHSA, or CSAT.