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RENEW

MAGAZINE

March/April 2012

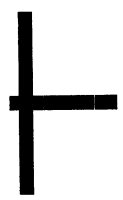
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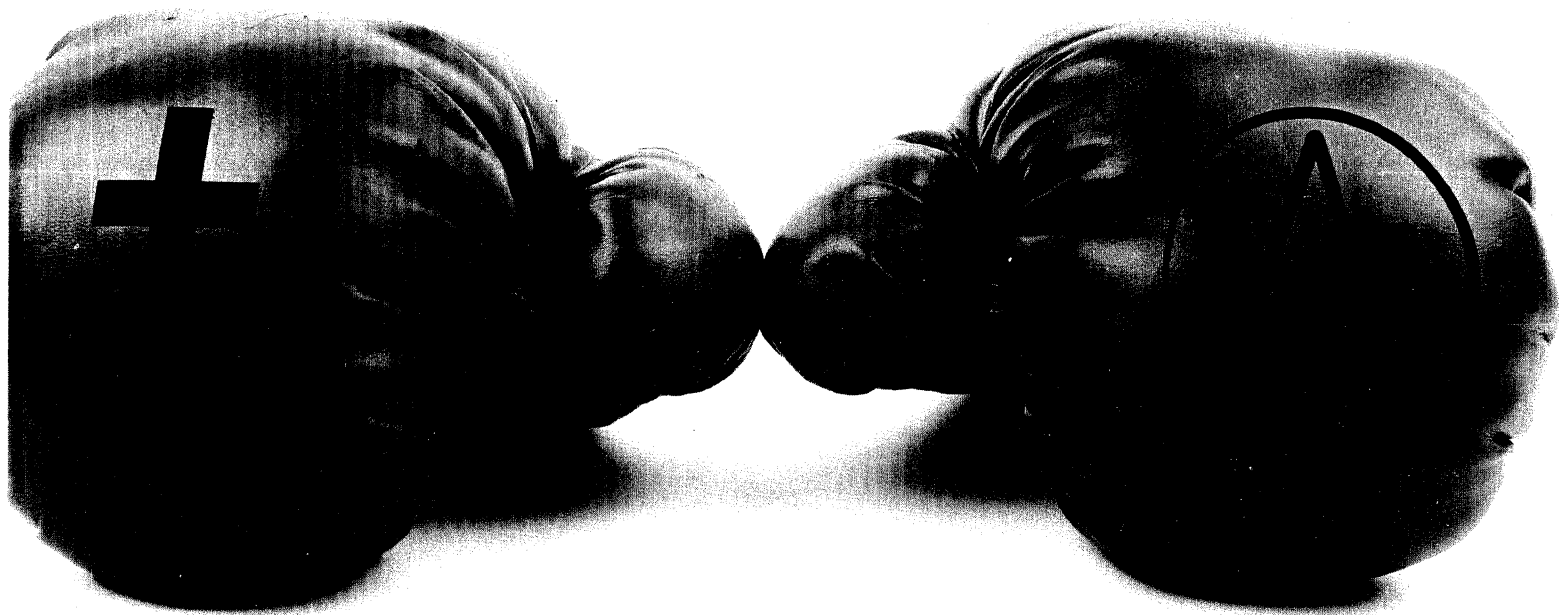
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Up for Discussion

GOD AND MAN AT AA

Religious disagreements narrow AA's spiritual gateway. *by Joe C.*

God-free AA isn't AA enough for Indianapolis, Toronto and Des Moines intergroups who voted agnostic groups out of meeting lists in 2011. Resolution has been found or pending on some fronts, but suspicion and hostility still brew.

Back at headquarters, General Service Office (GSO) is talking about greater diversity with discussion and presentations at the 2012 General Service Conference on "Change—Essential to AA's Growth" and "Diversity—Let's Keep our Doors Open for any Who May Suffer from Alcoholism." Although we're one united family at GSO, we have our drunk-on-dogma literalists versus our children of chaos nonbelievers in a local stare-down.

In the right corner, conservative stewards prefer reification to change—the enemy of AA scripture and verse. They are armed with yellow-highlighted *AA Service Manuals* and a position paper entitled the *White Paper on Non-believers*. The author denounces diversity: "It is time to make the tough de-

Inside our rooms, nonbeliever AAs want to stay put and be treated as rights-bearing equals. Bill W. envisioned a liberal, inclusive society. We can't have diversity without accommodation.

cision of whether we want to continue to allow the development of two AAs. One consisting of a path to sobriety using human power alone, the second, adhering to the belief that the only path to sobriety is through a God of our understanding. These two diametrically opposing belief systems simply cannot coexist!"

The author wields the politest of prejudices by "inviting" skeptics to take up residence in their own, secular fellowship where they would be free to recover in doubt, and in so doing, would transform the troubled AA of today to the mythological good old days where members were harmonious, homogenous and 75 percent of newcomers stayed sober.

In the left corner, AA members whose spiritual journey doesn't include any understanding of God and who call themselves free-thinkers. They do not see their non-theistic worldview as rebellious or pre-enlightenment. If speaking of God seems disingenuous or a barrier, they just write Him out of the Twelve Steps. Can they do that? Isn't that blasphemy?

With the smile of a Cheshire cat, one skeptic explains, "I can get sober without God because, as I see it, everyone does. Blasphemy is a victimless crime." Tradition Four and GSO invite the reading and distribution of any literature that helps alco-

holics stay sober, be it conference-approved or homemade. Several agnostic, humanist and secular Twelve Step versions have been sobering up drunks since agnostic AA groups started in 1978. Apparently, belief in God is no guarantee of recovery, and skepticism is no liability.

Here is how the service-manual argument against agnostic translation of the Twelve Steps goes. Bylaws for the General Service Board, Inc. states, "... the General Service Board asserts the negative right of preventing, so far as it may be within its power to do so, any modification, alteration or extension of these Twelve Steps. ... No change to Twelve Steps or Traditions (can happen) without the written consent of ¾ of all the AA groups ..."

It sounds convincing to conservatives that groups are to be policed and expelled

“ I don't need to manage another person's spirituality. I have a hard enough time managing my own. ”

for exercising artistic Twelve Step liberty. However, the Charter is to protect AA at large from the General Service Structure itself. Change can't be imposed upon us by them. As the manual states, "The Conference may act in the service of Alcoholics Anonymous, it shall never perform any acts of government." The World Service Manual does not circumvent each group's autonomous right to self-govern and identify itself as an AA group.

Sheldon Solomon, Ross Professor for Interdisciplinary Studies at Skidmore College, tests Terror Management Theory, examining why cultural symbols are fiercely protected when we are confronted with an

alternative worldview. Solomon's wry levity offers this synopsis: "It is understandable that atheists are now the designated objects of hate in AA. Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett (and other vocal atheists) of the world have done a good job antagonizing the religious people. Today we are an ethnically diverse cosmopolitan community; you can't hate the Muslims or gays anymore. Atheists are targeted because it's one thing most can agree on, making nonbelievers seemingly ripe for ridicule and caricature."

The atheist prejudice is expressed beyond AA's doors as well. In April 2011, a *Washington Post* article entitled "Why do Americans Still Dislike Atheists?" authors Gregory Paul and Phil Zuckerman state, "Rarely denounced by the mainstream, this stunning anti-atheist discrimination is egged on by Christian conservatives who stridently—and uncivilly—declare that the lack of godly faith is detrimental to society, rendering nonbelievers intrinsically suspect and second-class citizens."

Grapevine published a 1961 article in which Bill W. confronted his own bigotry: "In AA's first years, I all but ruined the whole undertaking with this sort of uncon-

scious arrogance. God, as I understood Him, had to be for everybody. Sometimes my aggression was subtle, and sometimes it was crude. But either way, it was damaging—perhaps fatally so to numbers of nonbelievers. ... Even now, I catch myself chanting this same old barrier-building refrain: 'Do as I do, believe as I do—or else.'" As a percentage of American population, the number of atheists has tripled since Bill shared his realization.

Most secular recovery programs were started by one-time AA members who felt alienated because they found a God-conscious bias in AA. James Christopher founded Secular Organizations for Sobriety, and he

sees AA as "a religion in denial." Life Ring, SMART Recovery and Rational Recovery are all legitimate ways to find sobriety whereby spirituality is optional. Outsiders no longer take AA at face value when we declare "We are spiritual, not religious." Some old friends to AA, from courts and high schools, are electing alternatives to AA. Public Information, once our outreach for AA, is starting to look more like PR harm reduction. Inside our rooms, nonbeliever AAs want to stay put and be treated as rights-bearing equals. Bill W. envisioned a liberal, inclusive society. We can't have diversity without accommodation.

Back at GSO, AA nonbelievers have a friend in nonalcoholic General Service Chairman and man of the cloth Ward Ewing. "AA does not have a creed or an official theology," Ewing says. "Spirituality is shared through one another's stories that move us at the level of the heart. What people like me with theistic faith miss are the real spiritual qualities of someone who does not have God. I don't need to manage another person's spirituality. I have a hard enough time managing my own."

The changing stewardship of AA may avert our Twelve Step program's crash course trajectory with reification. Generation X is educated, individualistic and bears a candid disdain for structure and authority. What second-generation management runs the company just like Dad did? And the most diverse generation ever, Millennials, are filling our Steps One, Two and Three rooms now. These youth won't be threatened by change or diversity the way Baby Boomers might be.

While steering the AA bus between the lines of the 21st century superhighway, too much focus on our rearview mirror is problematic. Better we ready ourselves for the future. Native North Americans tell us that we don't inherit the earth from our parents; we borrow it from our children. If this wisdom can be applied to AA stewardship, our task is less about canonizing the language of our founders and more about creating a legacy ready to meet the needs of the next generation. ■

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