



## Rebellion Dogs Radio # XIII Newsflash: AA Service Manual supports Alternative 12 Steps for groups - Inconceivable!



“Rebellion Dogs our every step at first,” says Bill W in the 12 & 12. We’ll be looking more at what he has to say from that text as we discuss the favorite arguments against having humanist/atheist/freethinker groups of Alcoholics Anonymous. We will look

at AA’s bylaws and see if groups are or are not allowed to interpret, amend or in any way re-write AA’s Twelve Steps for their purposes and if they do, can they still call themselves an AA group? We’ll look at the favorite Tradition breaking accusations that are so cliché in AA atheist-bashing that we hear the same things said from Indianapolis to Toronto, to the West Coast and back to Ohio. We will look at the intended meaning of rights, duties and warranties in AA’s Service Manual so that we can, once and for all, all be on the same page about who is in and who is out, and so there is no more confusion, we will all be able to identify at the end of this show, who has AA stewardship right and who is suffering from interpretations of traditions that do not mean what you think it means.

*Rebellion Dogs Radio is a 21st century look at 12 Step Life; now with less dogma and more bite.*

So we will let the naysayers make their point and we’ll look what A.A. literature has to say about these arguments. Words are important here; let’s make sure we agree on what they mean before either of us passes judgment on another.

Later in the show we’ll look at some goings on in the service of Alcoholics Anonymous. There is an new Angus Reid report on faith based vs. secular views of the world today in Canada and how these people in the survey might tend to look at

addiction and recovery. Nearly 30% of Canadians don't believe in a supreme being. Will three out of ten alcoholics in Canada have to have a conversion experience to find meaning and worth from AA. Do the 70% of Canadians want to make room for these nonbeliever or are atheists seen as a threat? The survey might actually provide answers to these questions.

It's the same in the USA and Europe, too. The Pew Research Group has some new data out showing that while belief in a world and universe governed by a supernatural personal god isn't going out of date, a natural, scientific worldview holds plenty of awe, mystery and hope for nonbelievers who do not warm up to Gods in the sky or floating between the cells of all sentient beings. The Pew Research report projects how different our landscape of worldviews will look in the USA, and the rest of the world.

In recent shows we talked about the increase in visible minorities – nonwhites making up over 40% of the population today and they fall below the 50% threshold by 2040. At about the same time, America be become blended as a Muslim, Christian and secular nation. How is that going to look? How is AA going to be effected?

I just saw a BBC series, “Around the World in 80 Faiths,”<sup>i</sup> hosted by an Anglican vicar who spent a year travelling the world to try different cults, rituals and traditions. On that theme, imagine if AA, devoted to maintaining our spiritual not religious credibility, started rotating through 80 meeting closing prayers to accommodate the different theologies “*as we understand them*”. Would that more fairly represent the plights of the still suffering alcoholic where AA meetings are held today? Imagine a prayer a week and not getting back to the Lord's Prayer for a year and a half. How comfortable would you be coming to a meeting for the first time, holding hands and trying to follow along with the words to a Tibetan Buddhist aphorism, smoking a cigar with Saint Death, celebrating a colorful Durga Puja festival, walking on coals in a Rajasthan ceremony, chanting a Sikh worship, exploring Jainism, being led in a South American UFO worship, praying to the Bolivian God of the underworld, eating some tree bark as the Botswana San Bushmen do, singing in Rastafarian style, talking in tongues, joining in an aboriginal drum circle or closing the meeting in the unusual fashion of the Diwali village of India and engaging each other in dung-slinging festival?

Wouldn't all that make us truly spiritual-not religious? Even here in North America, some monotheists view collective, out-loud praying as an arrogant, blasphemous

spectacle of ego – not faith at all. Maybe quiet time could better accommodate all people of both faith-based and reason-based fundamental worldviews. Otherwise, let's decorate our meetings with prayer flags, drums and burning coals and set aside our collective contempt prior to investigation, once and for all.

That's just me, exercising my imagination. Let's get down to earth on some issues about the rights of individuals, groups and AA as a whole that are causing some conflict and confusion right now.

Someone told me about an argument – a loud argument at Toronto Intergroup as three men were answering the phones. It had to do with the question of agnostic/ atheist/ alternative 12 Steps and their legitimacy in AA. Is reading a variation of the 12 Steps grounds for expulsion from AA or the group directory? The discussion was heated between two of the men. The third, it turns out, got curious and came to check out Beyond Belief Agnostics & Freethinker's AA group in Toronto, later that night.

The names of the men are not important. Both have been successful in AA for decades. Both men love AA and hope that our future is long and meaningful. Both have a gut-feeling about what is good for and what is bad for AA as a whole. One – the anti-secular member—asked the pro-AA inclusivity member if he had read the Service Manual lately and then chastised him for not being a worthy deacon. “What's worse than an old-timer who says he loves AA who hasn't read the Service Manual?” the AA literalist, snapped.

Hey, Mr. Literalist, over here: if you're interested, I can answer that question. “What's worse than a deacon who hasn't read the A.A. Service Manual? I would suggest that what's worse is someone who has read it and doesn't understand it.” Misinformation is worse than no information at all.

I will make this statement right up front. Everything in the Service Manual points to AA groups being welcome to conduct their affairs and hold themselves out to the public as they see fit. When we understand and agree upon what certain phrases mean, we will understand if and when there might be any limits to group liberty. Warranties, Rights, negative and positive rights, duty to accommodate—these are the terms that understanding or misunderstanding centers on. Yes, groups are asked to consider the overall needs of AA and the groups around them; this group (or any group) can do as it pleases and ought to be considered to be in good standing with AA as a whole. AA

as whole might not agree with them, but according to AA culture, each group has rights—even the right to be wrong.

The Service Manual, specifically the Bylaws for the General Service Board, talk about a duty held by the Board to protect the Twelve Steps from alterations. Does that mean enforcing uniformity upon the groups or does it mean something else? Good question; let's have a look.

BYLAWS of the General Service Board are found in Appendix E of *The A.A. Service Manual Combined with the Twelve Concepts of World Service*.

Bernard B. Smith authored the BYLAWS as one of the many acts of love and service for AA. He was a non-alcoholic Trustee of AA and International Lawyer who was our Chair of the Board and Conference from January 1951 to April of 1956. Bern Smith was a good friend to AA and he was a principle architect to the General Service Conference.

As Appendix E points out, AA's General Service Board "has but one purpose, that of serving the Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous." In keeping with the spirit of the

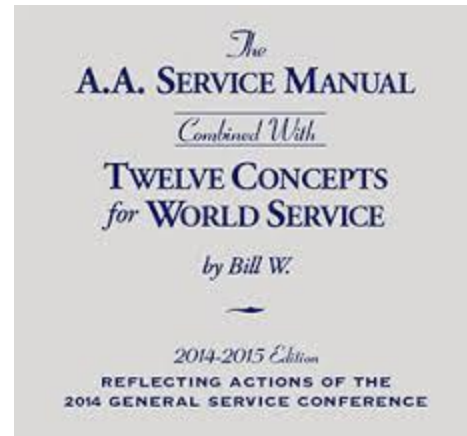


Manual and the Twelve Concepts that guide AA's service structure and the Traditions that guide members and our groups, the Bylaws do not intend to offer the Board any governance or authority over AA members and our groups. That is clearly stated throughout the manual. The Board's duty, as stated in the Bylaws is to "maintain services for those who should be seeking, through Alcoholics Anonymous, the means for arresting the disease of alcoholism through the application, in our lives, in whole or in part, of the Twelve Steps which constitute the recovery program upon which the Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous is founded."

Members have a right to accept, reject or to apply to our own lives in whole or in part, one step, the Twelve Steps, an Eight Fold path, four noble truths, or one hundred steps. The Twelve Steps are suggestions and by no means are they a qualification for membership among us. They are for our lives as we see fit; they are not to be

imposed on others, nor are they sacred and/or beyond individual interpretation and imaginative application.

The Board is, in essence, the custodian of the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions. We entrust the Board—not to govern us as members and groups but—to conduct our world service affairs as Concept VII states. The Conference Charter is not a legal document; it relies upon tradition and the AA purse for final effectiveness. In fact, Concept 12 reiterates that neither the Board nor the Conference “becomes the seat of perilous wealth or power... that it places none of its members in a position of unqualified authority over others...”



In 1941 we saw the first Women’s group of AA. This marked the beginning of acceptable practices for a group to cater to a subcategory of alcoholic member and/or newcomer. LGBTQ, young people, atheist/agnostic and career specific groups have followed, just as have groups and meetings for lawyers or in the airline industry. All of these groups are, and have been, unpopular with some members. So, if you don’t like them, don’t go—problem solved or averted.

In Appendix E, The Bylaws of the General Service Board, pg. S111, between the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions reads the following:

**The General Service Board of Alcoholics Anonymous (hereinafter referred to as either “General Service Board” or the “Board”) claims no proprietary right in the recovery program, for these Twelve Steps, as all spiritual truths, may now be regarded as available to all mankind. However, because these Twelve Steps have proven to constitute an effective spiritual basis for life which, if followed, arrests the disease of alcoholism, the General Service Board asserts the negative right of preventing, so far as it may be within its power so to do, any modification, alteration, or extension of these Twelve Steps, except at the instance of the Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous in keeping with the Charter of the General Service Conference of Alcoholics Anonymous as the same may from time to time be amended (herein referred to as the “Charter”).<sup>ii</sup>**



So, here is the great turgid statement. Let's look at what this means and doesn't mean, clearing up any confusion that might arise from the language. Working backwards, neither the Board, throughout the year, nor the Conference, at its annual meeting of Area delegates, Trustees and designated AA employees, can change, alter or modify the Steps (or Traditions) on our behalf.

For example, a motion would not be entertained to add "social media" to the Eleventh Tradition about anonymity by a member of the conference, have it voted on, and announced to the rest of us that AA now has a revised set of Traditions to read. No one could change "*God as we understand Him*" to "*God of our personal understanding*" or "*Higher Power*" just because our trusted servants thought AA ought to be more hip. They can change a pamphlet or release a new edition of the *Big Book* through this due process but to change the Steps for all of AA, all members have to vote and 75% of the voting members have to agree to any change. That 75% vote from us, the members, would constitute the instance of the Fellowship of AA.

So while the Traditions and Steps are suggestions and not rules, they do hold a special category that, I dare say, borders on sacred as they are held in trust and protected on the members' behalf by The Board.

Now, the fireworks: Just before the statement about how the membership can change or alter the Steps or Traditions we read that:

"... the General Service Board asserts the negative right of preventing, so far as it may be within its power so to do, any modification, alteration, or extension of these Twelve Steps..."

This, I suggest is what some literalist AA stewards jump upon to point to the sacredness of the Twelve Steps. They see "no modification, alteration, or extension of these Twelve Steps" and they believe they have proven that agnostic groups—at least those who read a secular interpretation of the Steps—have broken a vow, breached a code and forfeited their right to being treated as rights-bearing equals among other groups. "See," they say with righteous indignation, "you can't change the Steps and call yourself AA. Go start your own fellowship if you like; you're no longer welcome here."

That's the damage that a lack of understanding of words can do. That's the bending of the truth that evil doers throughout history have exercised to justify domination or discrimination over another, in the name of god.

First of all, if one is to interpret this passage about the board having a right to prevent as Intergroup's edict to expel non-conforming groups from the AA fold, let's ask a bigger question: Is this action of expulsion consistent with the rest of the Manual and/or the Warranties (Guarantees) that protect the members and our groups from the Conference and service structure? Secondly, to quote Indigo Montoya, a character from the Rob Reiner film, *The Princess Bride*, "You keep using this word; I do not think it means what you think it means." Let's look at words. Let's look at three things.

1. What is meant by a "negative right" of preventing?
2. What is meant by "so far as it may be within its power so to do"?
3. What is the context of the Bylaws as part of the *Service Manual* as a whole?

Rights are moral concepts that societies like AA use to help us get along. There is a big difference between our General Service Board claiming a negative right vs. claiming a positive right. If one doesn't know the difference between these two classes of rights, it would be easy to misinterpret them meaning of the Bylaws. Let's hear from to Aeon J. Skoble, Professor of Philosophy at Bridgewater State University, as he differentiates negative rights and positive rights.

"One reason that there's a lot of confusion about rights by both liberals and conservatives is that there are different sorts of rights. Besides the distinction between moral and legal rights, we also have to distinguish the different sorts of claims that an assertion of a right makes. Philosophers generally use the expressions negative rights and positive rights to express these distinctions. There is nothing evaluative about these terms; it's not negative in a bad way. These are precise terms that philosophers use to make an important distinction.

So let's see if we can explore this. This works if we are talking about lottery tickets, milk, potato chips, coffee and beef. My right to get these things is not an obligation to get them and neither is it a warrant to be given them. My right to get them means that no one ought to stop me from making trades through which I can acquire them.

That's a little different from, say, when you get arrested. You are informed that you have the right to an attorney. You know how they say it from TV; "If you can't afford an attorney, one will be provided to you." The store is under no obligation to provide me with a steak if I can't afford one. But the folks that

arrested me are obliged to provide me with an attorney if I can't afford one. So, these are different kinds of rights.

“Different kinds of rights?” How does that apply to the Bylaws, the board, and the groups in AA? If the Board claimed a positive right to prevent modification of the Twelve Steps, someone or something—presumably groups and members—would have a duty to accommodate and/or comply in order to meet the right of our Board. This would be an autocratic system, with authority filtering down from a central power to the levels of service (ie. Areas and Districts) and lastly to the groups and members. But that's not how AA works. GSO is like the United Nations of 115,000 countries, being meetings, all autonomous. Therefore, GSO does not and cannot exercise any right that would violate each group's right to self-govern. Yes, groups are asked to consider other groups or AA as a whole, but when the group has decided what is right for itself, that group's rights can't be infringed upon, even if the group is wrong.

What happens to a wrong group? Call it divine intervention or natural selection; either way, there is no need for willful intervention at the level of any AA service entity. GSO, delegates and Intergroups exist only to serve—never to govern—AA groups. Let's let this Bridgewater State University professor explain further:

“One way to get clear about this distinction is to think about the relationship between rights and duties; if Smith has a right, then Jones has a duty. If one is to understand what kinds of duties Jones might have is to understand what kinds of rights Smith might have. We will call “negative rights” the kind of rights that impose on others a “negative duty”—a duty not to do anything, a duty of non-interference. If I have a right of this sort, all you have to do to respect it is to refrain from blocking me. Negative rights are sometimes called, “liberties.”

Now, we'll call “positive rights” the kind of rights that impose on others a “positive duty”—a duty to act or provide in a certain way. If I have a right of this sort, you respect it by complying. Positive rights are sometimes called, “entitlements.”

So, my right to a lottery ticket or a steak is a negative one. No one can properly interfere to acquire these through trade. Freedom of speech is another negative



right (liberty). I cannot be arrested for speaking out. The right of criminal suspects to an attorney is a positive right; one will be provided.

One interesting thing with negative rights is that they don't conflict. We can all respect each other's negative rights all of the time. We simply have to refrain from using force to make people do our bidding. If I claimed to have a right to a steak, someone would have an obligation (duty) to give me one—not as a trade but as a nonconsensual service. That would violate their liberty, making them involuntarily subservient to me. This suggests that if we are free and equal by nature, any positive rights would have to be grounded in consensual agreement. Unfortunately for a lot of so-called positive rights, that just isn't the case.<sup>»iii</sup>

Does AA have *positive rights grounded in consensual agreement*? I believe we do: These are the six warrantees found in Concept XII. Later we will look at how these warrantees ought to protect every group and every member's positive right to self-expression and individuality from any punitive action or intimidation, but as Dr. Skoble says, "Unfortunately, for a lot of so-called positive rights, that just isn't the case."

Bigotry happens for one of two reasons. Ignorance breeds bigotry and so does hate. Information overcomes ignorance. Those inflicted with hate and fear can't *hear* information. They are closed, hostile and divisive. They thrive in the presence of an apathetic or uninformed majority. That's what I see every time a group is harassed by a delegate or Intergroup. Only against the backdrop of ignorance and fear can evil win the day. Only an uninformed, angry and hasty Intergroup could ever betray a group's positive right to be accommodated by the majority—no matter how unpopular or unusual this AA group may seem.

The Board has a right to prevent modifications to the Steps under certain circumstances. However, as a right and not a duty, the Board is not obligated to exercise their right. If the press missquotes the Twelve Steps, does the Board have a negative right, so far as it may be within its power so to do, to ask the news outlet to make a correction to properly represent AA's Twelve Steps? If the news outlet refused to accommodate this correction, would the Board have a right to take legal action against the news outlet?

When it comes to the media, the public or our own groups, the bigger question would be what does “so far as it may be within its power so to do,” mean? Clearly, the Board would not be within its power so to do, if violating any of AA’s Traditions. How could it over-rule a group’s decision (Tradition Two) autonomy (Tradition Four) or access to equal services and involvement (Tradition One)? Or, going beyond how the Board relates to the groups, how could it aggressively go after a rogue news outlet without engaging in public controversy (Tradition Ten)? Some of the powers of the Board, which we see now as very limited, are further dictated in our Concepts.

We see in Concept VII that the Board’s mandate is world service affairs. We see in Concept XII that the Board is never to govern over members and groups. The Board and the Conference are to avoid wealth and power. What is the likelihood that the Board or any level of AA service ought to ever adjudicate if a group is harming other groups or AA as a whole, when every group and every member has the right to be wrong? This is how context—how this negative-right line in the Bylaws fits into the spirit of the Service Manual as a whole—speaking to why one party (say GSO or Intergroup) can’t exercise their right when it infringes on the right of another (The AA group or AA member).

Why are groups autonomous? Group rights can’t be granted or suspended. They are god-given rights, or inalienable, if you prefer. There is no authority that oversees the group other than the decisions of its members. GSO can ask or suggest that a group do this or that. As a servant, not a form of government, GSO can’t expel a group that acts or thinks in a rogue way.

The membership—AA’s groups and individuals—are granted guarantees within these Warranties found in Concept XII. From p-8 “The Twelve Concepts” pamphlet, “these Warranties indicated the qualities of prudence and spirituality ... These are the permanent bonds that hold the Conference fast to the movement it serves ... The Warranties also express spiritual principles which apply to all other A.A. entities as well.”

For the purposes of context, Warranty Six ensures that members and groups give marching orders to the service structure. Never is the power dynamic reversed and never is one group’s rights ever to curtail another group’s rights. AA is not a popularity contest and groups are never obligated to comply or concede to the will of others. Warranty Six—the guarantee to us AA members—our rights are #1. Warranty Six states:

“That though the Conference may act for the service of Alcoholics Anonymous, it shall never perform any act of government ... The A.A. Traditions accord the individual member and the A.A. group extraordinary liberties. In fact, we A.A.s probably enjoy more and greater freedoms than any Fellowship in the world. We claim this as no virtue...

Because we set such a high value on our great liberties and cannot conceive that they will need to be limited, we here specially enjoin our General Service Conference to abstain completely from any and all acts of authoritative government which could in any way curtail A.A.’s freedom under God.”

Any questions? AA’s freedom, that’s each group and each member enjoys, has no authority but God herself—not so ironically, including atheist and agnostic groups.

Any act of fear, bigotry and ignorance in AA deserves our pity. It’s quite another thing to follow such a clay-footed leader without checking the facts or at least checking your heart.

The 65<sup>th</sup> General Service Conference is thinking about how diverse and inclusive AA is or ought to be. Areas and regions are discussing it. Further to, well, to my rant about the Canadian Eastern Regional AA Service Assembly panel on “Diversity in AA: Our Heritage of Inclusivity,” Robb W., past delegate of Area 83, invited three minorities to participate on his panel of the same topic. There was Cesar, from Toronto’s Spanish speaking district, Roshni, of a South Asian Hindu cultural background and me, Joe the Access-Ability Chair for district 10 and member of one of Canada’s twenty agnostic/atheist AA groups.

We were in the main ballroom; Robb express his regrets to the two other moderators as it seemed to him that everybody in Area 83 was here in our room. It was a packed house. The panel was well received—all of us were. Robb was able to, with our input, articulate how we’re all AA, alcoholics and AA members first, but each with our right to express ourselves without the need for any censorship or hostility from others. Through Q & A from Robb W, we were able to express that uniformity is by no means a requirement for unity in AA.

Meanwhile, three time-zones away, Ashley M. from the Pacific Region A.A. Service Assembly was talking to her region. Here’s an excerpt from her presentation which shows how supportive vs. how cruel and condescending AA’s can be to each other:

## **PRAASA Presentation by Ashley M.**

Hello Everyone! My name is Ashley M. and I am an Alcoholic. I currently serve as the DCM for District 1, Idaho Area 18.

I have been given the topic: Does our Fellowship make Agnostics, Buddhists, Spiritualists, etc., feel welcome in our recovery meetings? Through a lot of prayer and meditation I have decided not to give any of my own personal experience on this topic. Everything you will hear from me today is coming directly from other members of AA or from AA Literature. So without further ado here we go:

I interviewed individuals from Idaho, Hawaii, Colorado and Alaska to see if the fellowship in Alcoholics Anonymous is welcoming the Agnostics, Buddhist, Spiritualists, etc. and this is what I have found:

One member shared the following: Sometimes the best way to answer a question is to put yourself in the exact same position as a Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist or a Jewish person. ... This member stated that they do not have any direct experience with not feeling welcome in AA because of their spiritual beliefs but it is easy for them to see how others may be offended or unable to attend because of our strong Christian beginnings. ... This Member believes we can cast a wider net if we were to get rid of some of the dogma that is in AA.

I interviewed another member and she said the following (This is Amy the atheist's story):

Our fellowship does not make anybody feel anything: We are responsible for our own feelings. There are numerous ways, however, in which the fellowship can convey an attitude that is less than welcoming. This member spoke directly to member attitudes and actions, many of which are supported by common practices, and both supported and contradicted by our literature.

(Amy) moved through the process of coming to terms with recovery in Alcoholics Anonymous as a non-believer, she felt increasingly that she would be ostracized should the truth become known. She is grateful to have some years of recovery and much practice at 'fake it till you make it', which is great if you don't kill yourself in the interim. At any rate, her part being a lack of honesty driven by fear, to be honest about her atheism seemed to risk her recovery in AA.

In 2006, she came out about her beliefs and the years of lying about her beliefs. It was at her towns only closed AA meeting in the presence of many with similar durations of recovery – she was at 18 years and change. Cross talk directed specifically at her share was immediate. “I thought you were smarter than that,” and “How can you NOT believe given your recovery,” and “You’ll get there.” Seriously!? This thinking comes straight out of We Agnostics and Tradition Three in the 12 x 12 not to mention a thousand other scraps suggesting we all get God or die drunk.

That same year she came out as a non-believer, one of the local fellowship’s beloved old timers was asked to start us off with the closing prayer. Circling up and joining hands, to initiate the prayer, this old timer did not say “Who makes the stars and keeps us out of bars?” or “Who keeps us sober?” He led the group into the prayer by saying “Who keeps Amy sober?”

This member believes it is less true today than in the past, but there has been an institutional discrimination, by word and thought and deed, against non-believers in AA. Right, we’re spiritual not religious, though we religiously conform to habits and conventions that are deliberately or potentially alienating for those who believe differently. ...

Unfortunately, the members I interviewed were all asked the same question; to give me examples of when they felt discriminated against and when they felt like they were being supported in their beliefs. It saddens my heart deeply to tell you that their experiences with being discriminated against were significantly higher than that of being supported.

(Here’s a kind of happy ending to Ashley’s report; I love how this group embraced their village atheist :)

One member said that she felt supported when she was asked to be the Sunday Spiritual Speaker, and at her home group they closed with (the song) Zippidy Doo Da instead of the Lord’s Prayer.

Another member stated that she finally felt that she was being supported when she found an Atheist/Agnostic meeting. I would like to share one more quote from the *Language of the Heart* (pg 853) where Bill shares his experience “In AA’s first years I all but ruined the whole undertaking with this sort of unconscious 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 number of nonbelievers.”

“Even now I catch myself chanting that same old barrier-building refrain, “do as I do, Believe as I do-or else.”

In closing, I would like to thank the PRAASA Committee for asking me to present because I have made some great new friends and learned a lot diving into the literature.

In Columbus, an agnostic group fends off hostility from a local Intergroup. The fearful and intolerant are nothing if they are not predictable. We sometimes hear that a group can't be a group if it doesn't believe in God because these atheists are mocking the rest of AA who feel that God speaks to them through the Tradition Two group conscience process. Binary in their thinking, either we submit to god-fearing uniformity or the other groups, in the name of god, that the duty to expel the heathens from AA's fold.

This motivated me to look at the erroneous arguments we hear about why atheist groups aren't AA, according to our Traditions. By-The-Numbers (of AA Traditions). let's look at the typical, most popular arguments among anti-agnostic tirades:

1) Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon A.A. unity.

Can't we band together without a scapegoat? Yes, common welfare is essential. Individual welfare, not far behind, though. "Unity" doesn't mean stamping out unusual or unpopular groups. That would be "uniformity". And if our founders meant uniformity they would have said that personal recovery depends on uniformity. But they said unity; unity means respect for each other, the popular and the unpopular, the Pharisee, the Recalcitrant and all of the opinions and worldviews in between.

Groups are an extension of the individual in AA. The Twelve & Twelve talks about AA's promotion of individuality vs. conformity. In later Traditions we will see if AA's encouragement towards individuality that is bestowed upon members is in anyway curtailed for the groups we form in AA. In other words, do groups have explicit or implied limitations that the individual does not? On the first page of the essay on Unity (Tradition One), here's what AA's literature says:

“Does this mean,’ some will anxiously ask, ‘that in A.A. the individual doesn't count for much? Is he to be dominated by his group and swallowed up in it?’

We may certainly answer this question with a loud ‘No!’ We believe there isn't a fellowship on earth which lavishes more devoted care upon its individual members; surely there is none which more jealously guards the individual's



right to think, talk and act as (they) wish. No A.A. can compel another to do anything; nobody can be punished or expelled. Our Twelve Steps to recovery are suggestions; the Twelve Traditions which guarantees A.A.'s unity contain not a single 'Don't.' They repeatedly say 'We ought...' but never 'You must!''<sup>iv</sup>

For group unity, Bill W. uses this metaphor about our precarious sobriety, "They had suddenly found themselves saved from death, but still floating upon a perilous sea." None of us have a guarantee of uninterrupted sobriety. AAs depend on each other—when we need it, the other's meeting will be open, an ear will be ready to bend when we need to talk or someone else will be willing to talk if we need to listen.

John H. of the Washington DC We Agnostics Group illustrates how not only do we need each other but how exposure to a diverse range of AA experience can strengthen anyone with an open mind. In AAagnostica John writes:

In my own case from my first days in AA in the later part of the 1980s I was exposed to an incredibly varied set of personalities, mind sets and beliefs that invariably led to a deeper understanding of and compassion for my fellow members. The knowledge of stories "different" from my own and the growing conviction that I could possibly fit into the structure of the program within the parameters of my own rather unorthodox views proved that there was a place for the unlikely likes of me inside the fellowship.<sup>v</sup>

Tradition 2) For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority—a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern.

"You don't believe in God, then you don't have Tradition Two so you 're not an AA group; AH HA, Gotcha'!"

Well, first, if you believe in God then you believe that All Powerful He can influence the atheist AA group with his Godly mind control just as well as he can influence those who fear Him. He did defy nature by parting the seas one day and drowning the earth in a flood another day, right? Surely, manipulating the neurotransmitters of the unfaithful should be a piece of cake. Second, you who agree that Tradition Two is the word of God will note that no one "governs". So if you have it right and we have it wrong, we have the right to be wrong - without being treated with any more or less respect and/or right to autonomy than any other group.

Personally, "...there is but one ultimate authority--our group conscience..." reads just as soundly, without one worldview or another.

#### THE TWELVE TRADITIONS

1. Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon A.A. unity.
2. For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority—a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern.
3. The only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking.
4. Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole.
5. Each group has but one primary purpose—to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.
6. An A.A. group ought never endorse, finance, or lend the A.A. name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property, and prestige divert us from our primary purpose.
7. Every A.A. group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions.
8. Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever nonprofessional, but our service centers may employ special workers.
9. A.A., as such, ought never be organized; but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve.
10. Alcoholics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the A.A. name ought never be drawn into public controversy.
11. Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio, and films.
12. Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.

3) The only requirement for AA membership is a desire to stop drinking.

So, if you're a group of atheists don't you have two requirements for membership, not drinking + the atheist agenda (AKA: *destroying AA from within* as the prophet Dr. Bob predicted)?

Understand that anyone trying this one-requirement argument on for style also doesn't think there ought to be women's groups (which we've had since the first one in Cleveland in 1941), LGBTQ groups, young people's groups or meetings for the airline, law-enforcement or legal community. Again, see Tradition One: Unity, not Uniformity.

Secondly, I have never heard of a freethinkers group that wouldn't let any member join in the conversation without having to obey Lucifer or denounce the holy trinity. So, nice try - let's move on to Four, shall we?

4) Each group is autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole.

"Ah Ha, your humanist group is affecting AA as a whole."

If someone uses this argument, ask them to explain how "atheist groups affect AA" and you get a slippery slope argument. It might include, "If we let you \_\_\_\_\_ then what happens when the next group \_\_\_\_\_; where will it end?" It might describe a confused newcomer or public at large that can't make out one clear and concise AA message. Slippery slope arguments are fear-mongering. They paint a dark imagining, invoking hostility and rigidity. Like imprisoning a child for life for playing with guns in case she grows up and shoots someone, slippery slope arguments are meant to avert a possible future chain of events.

In the 1970s when the Conference discussed "allowing" groups to be listed as Gay and/or Lesbian groups, the argument was brought from the floor, "If we let these sex-deviants into the directory now, what will we be listing next year - AA rapist groups?" The Conference accommodated Gay & Lesbian groups (now LGBTQ affirmative) without falling prey to the slippery slope argument. First of all, accepting Gay AA

wouldn't set a precedent and secondly, this dark imagining of new sexual deviant groups never materialized; it turned out that the fear was just one delegate's homophobia disguised as stewardship.

Every group that starts anew will affect other groups in the area, insofar as a new Monday group will draw from the membership of other Monday groups. Some groups will be unpopular with other groups. I remember one stag-AA group in Calgary Alberta that raffled off a prostitute at every meeting. You can imagine the letters of righteous indignation that descended on GSO over that one; "Do something; they are ruining the reputation of AA!" Any GSO that follows the Traditions might make suggestions but would never make demands or revoke group status for non-compliance. Traditions are guidelines—not rules. If you're looking for absolutes, check our Warranties in Concept XII. Unfortunately or fortunately—depending on your bias—all you'll see is a service structure that protects the rights of individuals and our groups. Member and group rights are inalienable. They are neither granted nor revoked by AA servants. Again, Tradition Two—serve—not govern.

Damn, let's try Tradition Five:

5) Each group has but one primary purpose—to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.

"We have one message—the Twelve Steps as outlined in the Big Book. You can't change the Steps and call yourself an AA group; so there!"

Well there is only one set of Twelve Steps that the General Service Board is custodian of. They can't be changed by the Board or the Conference or even by a simple majority of members or groups. True, it would take 75% of our membership to change the Steps or Traditions. Right you are, but they are still only suggested—not sacred. Any member and any group has the right to reject or work them, interpret them or try them in whole in or in part, in any order they see fit. Go back to your Tradition and look for the italics in # 5: "*its*." Each group's primary purpose is tied to "*its*" purpose (as determined by Tradition Two - the collective conscience of the members). If our founders, touched by the hand of God or otherwise, meant "*the*" message—a uniformed, authoritative message—they would have used the word "*the*" but they chose "*its*" to be in keeping with the four Traditions that precede it. My group's message might include the Steps and it might not; there were AA meetings sobering up drunks before there was a *Big Book* or Twelve Steps. My group may read and follow the Traditions and it might not. We might pray or might not. We might read the Bible and we might not. That's none of your business. Conduct your group by *its* agreed upon message, and I'll do the same.

Sorry, Mr. Intolerant, that's strike five. Let's try one last one:

6) An A.A. group ought never endorse, finance, or lend the A.A. name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property or prestige divert us from our primary purpose.

"You atheist are affiliated with Atheism; aren't you?"

Sorry, no. Just like you're not affiliated with the church you rent space from or the brand of coffee you put in your urn, AA members who are atheists aren't all members of another secret society. Some of us might join humanists groups that do humanitarian things or political groups that fight for separation of church and state or fight against oppression based on religious mythology; but that's on our own time—not a group thing.

That's about it, Mr. Tradition Man. Don't try the public controversy thing because it's way more controversial to discriminate against a minority based on creed than it is to define how I live a secular AA life. You'll find something about principles before personalities further in the Traditions and being as we've already discussed the principles, don't go there.

Congrats to Columbus for keeping your heads and your listing. I hope I can come visit some day.

As we conclude, let's look at recent polls in Canada and around the world by Pew Research and Angus Reid to see what glimmer into the future, they might offer. What does the latest Pew Research mean to Twelve Step Recovery?

At the turn of the century some pretty flattering kudos came AA's way. *Time Magazine* included Bill Wilson as one of the most important 100 men of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The Library of Congress named the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* as one of 88 books that shaped American life. What will be said about us at the turn of the next Century? Will we still exist; if we're gone what will be our tragic flaw; if we're thriving how will we adapt?

Just recently the Pew Research Group looked at some data and made some predictions about worldviews and how the global religious landscape will change between now and 2050. AAs most read literature still uses a quasi-Christian worldview of a personal deity that is male and is called, "God". One third of the world today is

Judeo/Christian whereby an explanation of our world's governance is commonly understood as created and dictated by He who is named God.

Everyone should know that “There is one who has all power; that one is God. May you find Him now” is exclusive – not inclusive language. It would offend Muslims whose Allah is without gender. It would not include Hindus and others who have a polytheistic worldview. Many who do believe God created Earth don't believe he interferes with our day to day life and, as we've discussed, a growing population of Humanists, Buddhists, Atheists and Taoists see God talk as mythical and to entrust ones recovery from addiction into the hands of a prayer-answering God would be seen as delusional.

Here's what the latest Pew Research data has to say about the North America just outside AA's doors:

The religiously unaffiliated population is expected to nearly double in size, growing from 59 million in 2010 to 111 million in 2050. The number of Muslims is expected to nearly triple, from more than 3 million as of 2010 to more than 10 million in 2050, making Muslims the third-largest religious group in the region by mid-century.

North America's Hindu and Buddhist populations are expected to reach around 6 million each by 2050, although the rate of increase is projected to be much greater for Hindus (160%) than for Buddhists (58%). Increases of more than 100% are also forecast for the number of people who practice folk religions or identify with other religions (such as members of the Baha'i faith, Jains and Sikhs).<sup>vi</sup>

So, those who do subscribe to a God who could and would if He were sought aren't going away over the next few decades. It's just that Christians and Jews are losing their dominance. Jewish population will decrease slightly by 2050. Switching worldviews and religious affiliation will undermine the Christian stronghold in North America. Get this; 106 Million will switch out, while only 40 Million converts will chose the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit narrative. The net loss of Christians by 2050 will be 66 Million in North America. The Unaffiliated will pick up 61 Million of those, and the other five million will try on another belief system.

So, demographics are changing. I mentioned the Angus Reid poll at the beginning. It puts Canadians in different categories—those who are inclined to accept religious

ideas and those who are inclined to reject religious ideas. Angus Reid asked the question, “Is the growth in atheism a good thing for Canada or a bad thing?”<sup>vii</sup>

Of those inclined to reject religious ideas, 68 percent said, “Yes; atheism is good for Canada.” Of those who embrace religious ideas, 90 percent said, “No.” So if AA is a place whereby the majority of members embrace a loving God as he may express Himself in our group conscience, is AA going to be ready to make room for more atheists and will we be making efforts to help them feel more comfortable, or are we going to resist the nonbeliever? Maybe that’s something we can talk about next week. Have a look at these two studies; we will too. We can discuss the implication for AA more next time. How is AA going to embrace the inevitable?

Someone emailed and called this, “a podcast so nice, they always listen twice.” Ah, thanks. See you next week. Comments and questions are always welcome at [news@rebelliondogspublishing.com](mailto:news@rebelliondogspublishing.com)

Our outro music is Jon Cohen Experimental, “In Order to Survive” from the CD, Passion Pilgrim.<sup>viii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> <http://topdocumentaryfilms.com/around-the-world-in-80-faiths/>

<sup>ii</sup> [http://www.aa.org/assets/en\\_US/en\\_bm-31.pdf](http://www.aa.org/assets/en_US/en_bm-31.pdf)

<sup>iii</sup> [www.learnliberty.org](http://www.learnliberty.org) Prof. Aeon Skoble, Bridgewater State University, January 30, 2011

<sup>iv</sup> Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, p. 127

<sup>v</sup> <http://aaagnostica.org/2015/04/05/the-importance-of-diversity/>

<sup>vi</sup> The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010 – 2050 p 157

<http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/religious-projections-2010-2050/>

<sup>vii</sup> <http://angusreid.org/faith-in-canada/>

<sup>viii</sup> <https://thejoncohenexperimental.bandcamp.com/track/in-order-to-survive>