



Rebellion Dogs Radio Episode 67

What a CONCEPT: stewardship & public controversy as a self-inflicted wound

This blog/podcast is dedicated to the memory of AA Historian Arthur S, who died January 3, 2022. The loss of Arthur creates a void of AA stewardship that I hope we can collectively fill. I didn't know Arthur like a regular at my own home group, but I relied heavily on his scholarly contribution to the continuing saga of AA and addiction recovery history. Arthur, while capable and prolific, was clear to not speak for AA, while asserting that he held a "personal interest in the history of AA and consider it imperative to correct historical inaccuracies and propagation of myth." Among other cornerstones I have often referenced, in 2008 along with Glenn C (also recently passed) and Tom E, compiled *AA Recovery Outcome Rates—Contemporary Myths and Misinterpretations*.ⁱ I have Relied heavily on Art's contribution to the AA Timelineⁱⁱ and the 20,000 pages from the A.A. History Lovers sight. Glenn C had this to say: "Arthur continued to be the researcher we all depended on to give us a reasoned answer to hotly debated questions, backed up by impeccable sources."ⁱⁱⁱ

WHAT A CONCEPT: The third year of the third decade of the third millennium CE starts with AA controversy. My position on this controversy may also be controversial among dawgs in our Rebellion Dogs community. Let us start with the news peg: In the UK, *The Daily Mail* reports on January 1, 2022,

"An Alcoholics Anonymous group is under threat after being censured for reciting the Lord's Prayer at the start of meetings. The group in Somerset [England] was told by leaders it had become too Christian-focused and has been removed from the organization's online directory."^{iv}

The opener does not even touch on this group's digressions. Members in the group speak candidly as the light of Jesus being the one true path to AA recovery. I do not think I would enjoy their meeting, so much. My preferences are not the issues. Plenty of meetings I do not like have been helping people find sobriety for years.

"Who is right and who is wrong?" Is the group wrong to not conform to what the General Service Office espouses are the restrictions of inclusion as an AA group? Is the GSO wrong for mistaking its role as governance when its sole purpose is servicing the needs of AA groups?

Right or wrong is not a salient issue. AA values do not weigh in on "Who *is* right; who *is* wrong?"

"Who *has* the rights; who *is* subservient?" is more to the point in AA culture.

Picking a side (GSO or autonomous AA group) is a partisan issue; the issue of autonomy vs authority is an issue that has come up in the past and it will come up again.

I am not looking to point fingers or find fault (not this time, anyway). But what can be learned or better put, re-learned? We have been here, before. The suffering, hard feelings and fallout in England are not over yet. If the answers are easily understood in our Twelve Concepts and Twelve Traditions, then why are these principles not front of mind? On a light note, maybe because they do not rhyme...

And the seasons, they go round and round
And the painted ponies go up and down
We are captive on the carousel of time
We can't return, we can only look
Behind from whence we came
Round and round and round in the circle game
Joni Mitchell

[And the seasons, they go round and round](#)

The calendar flips, the seasons change, AA, cycles through our familiar, circular pattern. Again, AA is in the news. So far, it is the B-list, fringe news sources, thirsting for juicy gossip, their cup runneth over. How did that happen? Here is what initiates the circle game that we created: An AA group did something that repulses other groups—not news. A General Service Office felt concerned—not news. The General Service Office reacted—now that's news.

There are consequences... with unintended consequences to follow. As an aside, to the religious rags and internet click-bait pushers, calling you B-list news outlets was not meant to be a diss. Now that Rebellion Dogs is weighting in, we clearly see our special place in the universe as the D-list newswire. I am just saying BBC, Al Jazeera and CNN aren't interested.

[And the painted ponies go up and down](#)

If you ask me if the Lord's Prayer is superstitious, yes. Are Christian prayers the best way to introduce a newcomer to AA; no, not in this millennium, not in my view. And... the "and" is more important than my preferences.

A Quick look @ the "Yes" and the "And":

Yes (my preferences): "Our father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven" ... No I do not believe—as AA theists might—that a supernatural force weighs-in when petitioned, on one's continued sobriety or wellbeing.

My belief is something different; AA is more accessible and effective to more people without Abrahamic ideas of higher powers. I am not against religion. I am not against people in AA expressing themselves in religious terms. I have seen for myself, sincere theistic faith bringing comfort, lasting sobriety, and service to others. Theists dominate AA as a whole. They will do what is natural, according to their programing—just like I do or anyone. Theists pray and, in a meeting dominated by believers, they will pray in meetings. I am a non-theist; their praying, in their meeting, is neither contagious nor oppressive to me. It is not anti-AA, is it? The same rights apply to any other religious or secular expression of sincerely held beliefs, subtle or orthodox.

My AA group, not surprisingly, is made up of others who agree with my worldview. It's misrepresentation to call me a non-believer because I don't believe in gods; here's what I believe:

The "secret sauce" or mysterious AA ingredient that makes sobriety work where previous efforts failed, to us, is *natural*, not *supernatural*, the agency is *esprit de corps*, the connection, experience, and shared purpose of the AA group. This agency aids my individual efforts to get and stay sober. My human will is not an enemy of my sobriety, contrasting a popular AA view of the "my will" vs. "God's will" paradigm. Right thinking is an asset. As I see it, personal responsibility is learned, and practiced by everyone who stays sober in AA, regardless of their worldview.

My beliefs are as sincerely held as my fellow AAs in Yeovil, UK. I believe in the transformative power of AA but I am not holding out for, or depending on, intervention from any prayer-answering, sobriety-granting unworldly power or messiah. The members of their group, on the other hand sincerely feel something they identify as following the path of Jesus.

The big "And"/ Principles before Personalities: Equally to my belief that the Lord's Prayer evokes no gods, is my unconditional support for the UK AA group – unabashedly Christian or any other AA group – to conduct its affairs as the members agree, no matter how unpopular their message or rituals may be, and regardless of how persuasive or dissuasive their posture. In the language of AA culture: "Always inclusive, never exclusive," "Live and Let Live."

In AA it is more about who has what rights because member and group rights are inalienable. Anyone talking about – and certainly voting about – the legitimacy of an AA group to which they are not a member does not understand this "inalienable" thing. In higher power language, "What God has brought together, let no man put asunder." In secular terms, the right for alcoholics to meet in AA's name is not bestowed by AA as a whole (other groups); our rights as a group are inherent – not granted. Therefore rules or voting by other AAs cannot constrain or repeal any group or member rights.

No amount of disapproval or disgust, can change that. Within AA, there is no recognized means by which to punish or expel rogue groups or members. Now, if the member or group violates the law of the land, that is quite another thing. AAs, no matter how precious we might feel we are, as groups or members, we are citizens within jurisdictions governed by and bound by laws. A group could unanimously vote to allow smoking inside their face-to-face meeting. Enacting that group conscience sets other things in motion, local rules, and landlord policy, for instance. For the purposes of this discussion, I am talking about issues strictly of importance to AA membership, not the local law enforcement.

Setting aside, if we can, what you think is a better way to run an AA meeting or what I think, are there already guidelines to fall back on if and when a central office or General Service Conference feels that a group/member has gone too far? Yes, it is clearly stated and yes, we have precedent based on similar differences.

There are misconceptions about Traditions, and I expect this is at the root of why problems repeat themselves. We hear the expression, "violating an AA Tradition" as if AA Traditions were rules and disobedience has consequences.

If our Twelve Traditions were to be enforced, who would you suggest should enforce them?

AA is not a popularity contest. To let the majority control the minority, AA would need to first upset the inverted triangle that illustrates the relationship between groups and the service structure: groups at the top (some typical, some unique), the service structure below. AA culture does not celebrate judging other AA members or groups as enlightenment – or wokeness if you prefer. Exhilarating as pointing out the faults of others may be, that's not what we call "working an AA program."

TWELVE TRADITIONS & TWELVE CONCEPTS

Along with AA's ethos of more attention on "my side of the street," I see Traditions as an inside-job, a checklist to see how I am doing (taking my own inventory): How do I practice anonymity; do I do my share to support AA; do I place principles ahead of personalities; do I respect the autonomy of other groups? Further to self-examination, groups can take their inventory (not the other group's inventory). Traditions generously share the wisdom of the AA ages, lessons learned from missteps from our past. Is there anything in AA that is either forbidden or sacred? You or I may be forming a list in our minds right now of AA "musts" and "must nots." Would we both agree with everything on each other's lists? With the impracticality of fellowship-wide consensus, the only rules a group must follow are rules it sets for itself.

If you are feeling that anarchy is not your understanding of how AA works, you are not alone. This lawless liberalism is not how AA has been explained to you. An unforgettable adage about the AA service structure and fellowship is this: "There are no rules in AA; and plenty of people to explain them to you."

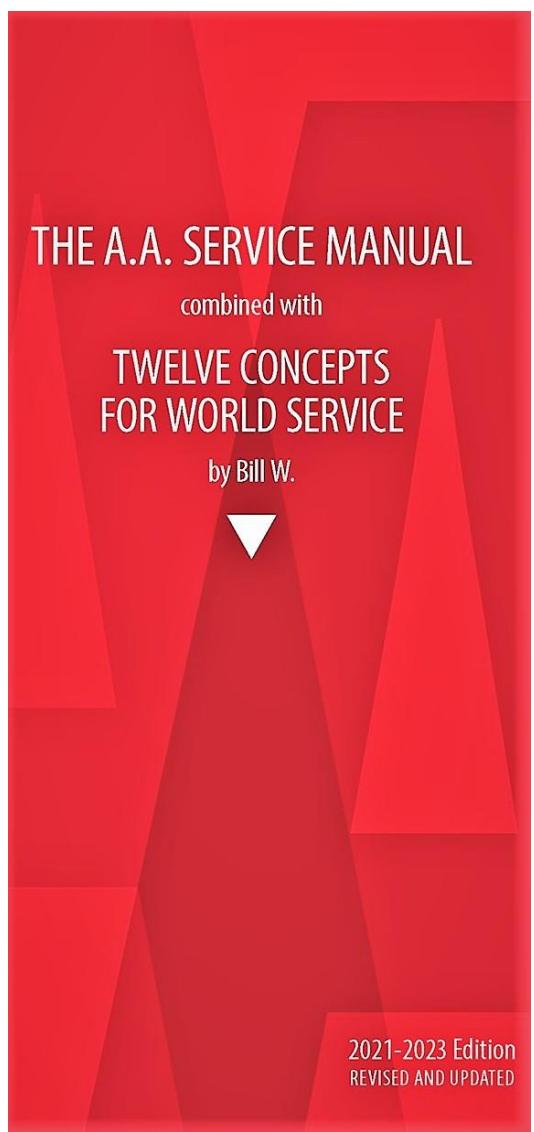
I have my own biases about how AA should and should not be, just like anyone might. How do we adjudicate; who has the final say? I wonder what the very last thing that the architect of AA wrote about stewardship? The General Service Office of AA, in the news today, that voted one of their fellow groups off the meeting list, may want to ask the same question. Their unanimous decision might have exacerbated—not resolved—the problem of "violating Traditions."

At the end of The Twelve Concepts is Concept XII. You knew that. I know; but can you say it aloud from memory? I know, right—that is harder. From *The AA Service Manual*, I have bolded the issues that are in play here; feel free to do the same or use a highlighter:

"General Warranties of the Conference: in all its proceedings, the General Service Conference shall observe the spirit of the A.A. Tradition, **taking great care that the Conference never becomes the seat of perilous wealth or power**; that sufficient operating funds, plus an ample reserve, be its prudent financial principle; that none of the Conference Members shall ever be placed in a position of unqualified authority over any of the others; that all important decisions be reached by discussion, vote, and, whenever possible, by substantial unanimity; **that no Conference action ever be personally punitive or an incitement to public controversy**; **that, though the Conference may act for the service of Alcoholics Anonymous, it shall never perform any acts of government**; and that, like the Society of Alcoholics Anonymous which it serves, the Conference itself will always remain democratic in thought and action."^v

Okay, so the fact that you cannot memorize Concepts and I can't either, might be part of the problem; practicing these Concepts in all of our affairs is not natural. A lot of what will become AA

controversies, first seemed like obvious answers to a widely agreed upon problem. Things go south on us. A calm and clear understanding of our Concepts could anticipate and avoid problems. But these principles are not front of mind, when confronted with conflict. Why aren't the Concepts easy to grasp; did AA abandon "keep it simple" in articulating the Concepts? Simple, compared to what? It is more complicated running a fellowship than a home group or our own recovery program.



Is it any wonder that at *Big Book* meetings, no one quotes Concepts and their *Service Manual* page numbers? Exactly... it is not the simple nursery rhyme-like prose as the Twelve Steps. Most of us do not read the warranties on our car until the vehicle won't start. AA's Warranties are like that. It is comforting to know, "Hey, there's a guarantee! I'll read it later." We don't read the *AA Service Manual* until there's a problem. Then it is urgent; we get on the phone, and someone has some explaining to do.

So why do I know a bit about the Concepts?

Since 1976 I have been involved in the AA service structure, from time to time, doing my tour of AA duty. After a few months of sobriety, I was moved from kitchen duty to group rep. Since then, being involved at district, area, and on local committees, I have been stagehand, sound engineer or committee chair for dances and events, holding pretty much every position a conference or Public Information committee might offer. That's not why I know Concepts; none of that compelled me hit the books on the Twelve Concepts of World Service.

Getting my AA group kicked out of AA – well, that piqued my interest. Maybe I would have learned these vital details earlier if the Twelve Concepts and Service Manual were more like learning a Joni Mitchell song. Actually, someone is doing something about our drab service manual; have you seen the new flashier 2021-2023 *AA Service Manual*? It looks like a study guide for a community college course or something more engaging

than previous editions. There are pictures; and charts... seriously. It exceeds my expectation.

Meanwhile back in Southwest England.... Concept XII, Warrantee Six: could this have prevented starting the AA circle game? Here is the flash-card version. See if you can find anything that might pertain to the uber-Jesus AA meeting and the rules enforcing Central Office:

- It is probable that we A.A.'s possess more and greater freedom than any fellowship in the world today ...
- We set such a high value on our great liberties, and cannot conceive a time when 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 wise curtail A.A.'s freedom...

- Our Conference will always try to act in the spirit of mutual respect and love – one member for another. In turn, this sign signifies that mutual trust should prevail; that no action ought to be taken in anger, haste, or recklessness; that care will be observed to respect and protect all minorities; that no action should ever be personally punitive ...
- Our Conference will ever be prudently on guard against tyrannies, great or small, whether these be found in the majority or in the minority.^{vi}

Picture Bill Wilson, standing before us all, finishing with these points – “AA, you've been great; goodnight!” Cue the applause. Mic drop; boom!

That is the final word on the final page from the man who crafted Twelve Steps, Twelve Traditions and Twelve Concepts. So let's review a checklist...

1. Did you see a list of exceptions, here?
2. Did you see obligations that groups or members must meet or maintain to ensure our fitness for inclusion?
3. Do you see a means in which to vet groups, govern groups or expel groups?

If your answer was no, no, no, I was *Oh 4 Three, 2!*

Am I cherry picking, borrowing authority from one Bill W-ism while ignoring another? Our founder repeatedly maintained an unwavering position, since July 1946. If you are reading something different, speak up, email me – fact-checkers welcome. I may be informed by incomplete information. I miss Art S already – accurate, well cited AA information was what he offered us in AA; if you can fill his shoes, AA need you now. But this we know, as part of the AA record. In *AA Grapevine* about the proposed, and now adopted, Twelve Traditions Bill introduced the whole idea this way:

“an alcoholic is a member if [they] say so; that we can't deny [them] membership; that we can't demand from [them] a cent; that we can't force our beliefs or practices upon [them]; that [they] may flout everything we stand for and still be a member. In fact, our Tradition carries the principle of independence for the individual to such an apparently fantastic length that, so long as there is the slightest interest in sobriety, the most unmoral, the most anti-social, the most critical alcoholic may gather about him a few kindred spirits and announce to us that a new Alcoholics Anonymous group has been formed. Anti-God, anti-medicine, anti-our recovery program, even anti-each other – these rampant individuals are still an AA group if *they think so!*”

Now, Bill W does not control us from the grave; his is one voice. We can run the AA fellowship any way we choose. Collectively, a substantial majority in agreement, can run AA into the ground. Bill will not come back and stop us, will he? Individually, central offices can go rogue and that's part of AA's circle game. We AA's can conscientiously object to the guidance of the *Service Manual*. We can ignore and forge our own path. Like anything AAish, “these are meant to be suggestive only.” I am not intentionally name-calling or sounding like I want to tell a UK General Service Office what they must do; I am not trying to rescue a far-away group from an angry, hasty, or ill-informed service structure, either. By everything I have described about AA, this is for local members to sort out. I

just see a learning opportunity here, or should I say, “re-learning” as we go round and round and round in the circle game.



When I read that a well-intentioned trusted servant, justifies their actions in the press by “acting in accordance with AA Tradition,” I am compelled, by my programming, to invoke *The Princess Bride*, Inigo Montoya classic^{vii} and say that you keep using [this phrase]; I do not think it means what you think it means. My understanding, crazy as it sounds, is if the groups are wrong, don’t they have the right to be wrong? Again, is AA stewardship about who *is right* and who *is wrong*? Or do we look to who *has the rights* and who is in the service of the other?

Bill, I am sure, was not prophesizing in 1946 what would happen in South Somerset (or Toronto, or Des Moines or Indianapolis, etc, etc). I am sure his cautionary warnings were more practical. It seems to me that Bill W was drawing on AA’s first eleven years of circle game growing pains. Groups were already, with good intentions, going on rule-making benders. “Anti-our recovery program” is a pretty broad liberty. This broken record of trouble in the paradise of always inclusive, never exclusive AA was what Beyond Belief Agnostics & Freethinkers and We Agnostics group in Toronto were dealing with when the Greater Toronto Area AA Intergroup general meeting allowed a motion to have our groups removed from the directory. Anti-agnostic/atheist AA lobbyists were organized and motivated to *save AA* from a transgression that was taking “love and tolerance” too far. That was 2011. The same thing was going on with We Agnostics in Indianapolis and other central office meetings around the country... around the world.

Toronto’s *Big Book* enthusiasts were angry and afraid and thought that the simple majority of votes that they had secured could rescind another group, “for the good of AA and the impressionable newcomer,” of course. Our group included non-conference-approved literature in discussion and on our library table: guilty. We borrowed secular interpretations of AA’s Twelve Steps and we collectively wrote our own and read them at our meeting: gulty. As to the accusation of, “taking God out of AA,” we did express the practical aspects of AA recovery and doubt, or disbelief was not discouraged. However, we certainly were not mounting a “war on belief in supernatural intervention a la higher power.” And in unabashedly offering the secular view of AA, we felt entitled as rights-bearing equals along with all the more complicit or more uniformed groups. Even if you were inflexible about a view that we were un-AA, so we’re doing it all wrong; how is that the business of other groups? At least in Bill Wilson’s view of “anti-God... these rampant individuals are still an AA group, if they say so,” right?

From my firsthand experience of this AA circle game, I see the round and round pattern again today; one painted pony rising, one painted pony falling. While the worldview of this seasons offending group is in the opposite “more religious AA members” camp, the discriminatory tone is unoriginal. The angry majority would tell atheist/agnostic groups like mine, “Go start your own fellowship. AA never intended to be all things to all people. AA comes with God; take it or leave it.”

An invitation to leave the “lifeboat of AA” is more polite bigotry than, “Go F*** yourselves,” but it is rooted in the same prejudice and intolerance. Let us never call kicking out another AA group, diplomacy, or stewardship. And now, while this religious AA group is facing the same double-talk nonsense in the UK, I hear some of my friends joining a chorus of “If they want Jesus and 12-steps, why don’t they go join Celebrate Recovery or Alcoholics Victorious (Christian based peer-to-peer groups)?” Of course we all have the right to leave AA and do our own thing; that is an inalienable right, too. Or as Bill W liked to say, our “freedom under God.”. We can also stay put and expect “love and tolerance of others is our code” to win the day.

We inherited an AA community with customs and a service structure with the idea of group oversight, thoughtfully considered and then rejected. How could rules be enforced, or rights removed from, a group “in violation of the Traditions?” The group, like the member has the right to be wrong. Bill W was a pioneer and he thought like a visionary; we are followers, and we think like adherents. Are we adherents more inclined – by our nature and programming – to fear change, and seek authority?

[We are captive on the carousel of time - We cannot return, we can only look - Behind from whence we came](#)

I read this month’s headlines from the UK, and I found myself reflecting back to when it was the freethinkers group that “our more religious members” wanted to kick out. With this Christian group being treated the same way it seems like Goldilocks syndrome: this meeting’s too liberal; this meeting’s too conservative; we insist on everyone’s AA being just right. This circle game is a formula for disunity, not unity. We can “look behind from where we came” further and see more troubles with finger pointing. Here was what was on AA’s mind in *Box 4-5-9: GSO’s News & Notes April/May 2004*. Then, they were revisiting an address given nearly twenty years earlier by Bob P, who knew and worked with Bill W. Some slip into assuming what Bill W meant, the unspoken, clearer, and more definitive truths from our founder. I am guilty of that. Instead, we can hear from someone who worked closely with Bill W, day in, and day out. Many of us AAs heard Bob P speak these words at the 1985 World Convention of AA in Montreal’s Olympic Stadium. His farewell speech, along the same lines, to GSO was recorded in 1986:

“I echo those who feel that if this Fellowship ever falters or fails, it will not be because of any outside cause. ... it will be simply because of us. ... It will be because we have too much fear and rigidity and not enough trust and common sense. ... If you were to ask me. ‘What is the greatest danger facing Alcoholics Anonymous today’, I would have to answer: the growing rigidity that is so apparent to me and many others. The increasing demand for absolute answers to nit-picking questions. Pressure for G.S.O. to *enforce* our Traditions. Screening alcoholics at closed meetings. ... And in this trend toward rigidity, we are drifting further and further away from our co-founders.

Bill, in particular, must be spinning in his grave, for I remind you that he was perhaps the most permissive person I ever met. One of his favorite sayings was, ‘Every group has the right to be wrong,’ he was maddeningly tolerant of his critics; and he had absolute faith that faults in A.A. were self-correcting.”

So UK GSO, do you see your expulsion of a member group as a story for the ages of GSO heroically and dutifully taking the difficult role as agents of AA’s “self-correcting” pattern? If you hear no

more about this and peace is found in the valley, you are right. But if you have caused more animosity than unity, will the “self-correcting” be your next move to practice Step 10: Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong, promptly admitted it”?

I am not telling you what to do. If you have improved on Bill W’s AA stewardship, we are all watching, and we will learn. Our lessons learned in Toronto included unintended consequences. One could say the results were the opposite of the intended cure to rid AA of *the threat* posed by a growing secular AA voice or option. May 2011, Greater Toronto Intergroup kicked out, not the first two, but the only two then active secular AA groups in all of Canada, at that time. By the time that our two groups were welcomed back into the fold, unconditionally to govern ourselves as we see fit and participate with other local groups as equals, there were now thirty agnostic/ atheist/ freethinker groups in Canada (a dozen in the Toronto area others from our Pacific to Atlantic shores. Today, secular AA is as matter of fact as women’s or young people’s or LGBTQIA+ meetings. Not everyone likes them, but no one questions their legitimate AA-ness.

The UK story has more similarities than differences. This time it is a Christian fundamentalist group, not our godless heathens. But the principles remain the same. While praying and Jesus-talk may have disturbed some, that is not what made news—the click bait came from GSO disenfranchising the group. And now we find ourselves in self-inflicted “public controversy” Tradition mode.

Tell me this won’t make it’s rounds on social media: *Christian News Magazine* headline reads:

“Are You Kidding Me? Cancel Culture Now Attacks Alcoholics Anonymous Group”^{viii}

Christian Today, quotes an AA trustee,^{ix}

“Tom Fox, a non-alcoholic Trustee of Alcoholics Anonymous, said the Yeovil group was removed because it was ‘using non-AA approved material’ and had presented Christianity as the only route to recovery.

Alcoholics Anonymous is not a Christian organization. Many of its members, including myself, are Christians but we’ve also got members who are Muslim, Jewish, Hindu or of no faith,’ he said. ‘It is an organization that recognizes the value of spirituality. People pray at every meeting and the meetings end with a serenity prayer. People may also use the word God as they understand it.

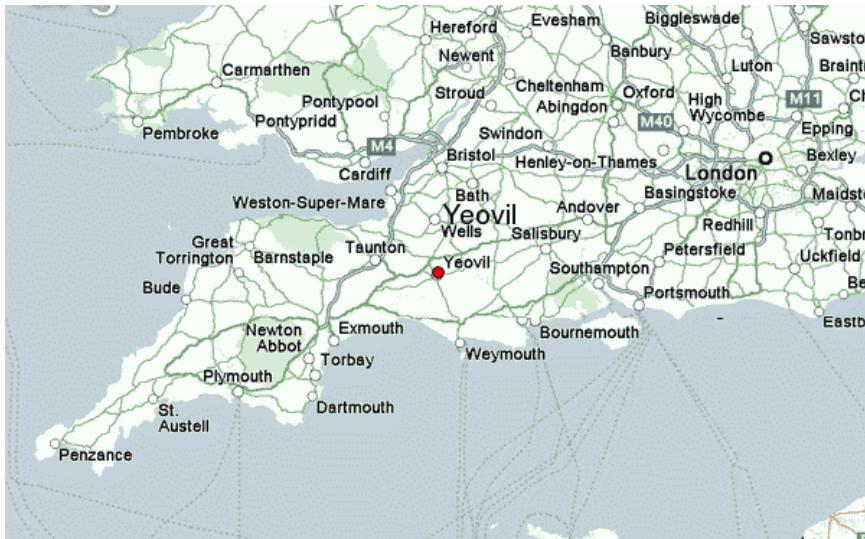
But it is not accurate to say that AA has diverted recently from its Christian tradition because as [the Preamble](#) makes clear, we are not associated with any particular denomination or sect but rather welcome people from all backgrounds. Nor is it accurate to suggest that our acceptance of a variety of different religions is a new thing, because it isn’t.”

Tom Fox, if you are being quoted correctly, you are making your case for who *is* right and who *is* wrong, here. You could be right and still have gotten this wrong. Would you agree that the more Tradition-based question is “Who *has* the rights?” What Bill W appears to be saying is that experience shows that rule-resistant alcoholics don’t want to be told what to do.

I do not like being told, that I can confirm. I have learned in life and in recovery to grow from criticism and accept helpful advice. Still, inside AA I expect to be heard—not told. Have you ever

heard the expression, "If we want GSO's opinion, we will give it to them." I am ½-joking about that, communication with the service structure is a two-way, symbiotic relationship.

By doubling down on an already dubious act of "stewardship," speaking to the press, representing AA, we find ourselves in the crosshairs of worldwide controversy: AA vs. Christianity. So, is Tom Fox wrong?



Some will disagree and some will criticize but I know that his service to AA is from a place of love for AA. And the Christians that sincerely believe that not only is adherence to Jesus Christ the best route to salvation from alcoholism, I am sure they believe, based on their programming, that what they are saying is implied or intended by our AA founders.

Tom, not every AA meeting includes prayer or spiritual-not religious higher power talk. Any time you or I start a sentence with, "Alcoholics Anonymous is...", no matter how you or I finish that sentence, A) some will have a different experience of AA, and B) you or I give the impression that AA is top-down like McDonalds who closely guards the menu options and atmosphere of every McDonalds restaurant. AA groups are more akin to a collective of independent eateries. Many of us offer very familiar menus, but some of us cater to niche needs, unfamiliar to other local groups. AA is the group, at the top of the inverted AA triangle. And each group is a little bit different. One secular group would find another secular group's rituals unbecoming and one *Big Book* study group may disparage another *Big Book* study group's rituals or format. Each AA meeting is as individual as fingerprints.

AA is united groups of widely different interpretations of AA's message. Every group, does what it does, hoping and believing that this style will best serve members and newcomers. And not one of our groups, trying different methods, has kept 100% of our members and gotten 100% of newcomers sober. So, let's keep trying new things, strange as these deviations might seem to others. AA stays vital by widening our gateway, not restricting it.

Tom, you must have thought Bob P above was reading your mail and listening in on your conversations. These are conditions that AA has always been presented with, and always will. Is there any one thing that every group does, worldwide. Maybe, and maybe not. The reasonable doubt as to the existence of even one unifying practice should discourage any of us from speaking about AA as one format, one ethos or a uniformed message. The autonomous meetings are equals, at the top of AA's structure; we who serve, find our place below, in support of the groups.

We run the risk of Cancel (sub-)Culture. The fundamentalist groups want to cancel the secular groups for "watering down" AA with their god-optional, orthodoxy-optional promises. Liberal groups want to cancel "our more religious members" from praying to gods and doorknobs in their meeting because their praying gives life to embarrassing stereotypes of AA. Bill Wilson was not

worried about all this squabbling. Or if he were, he was more worried about how long an AA based on uniformity – instead of unity – could or would last.

Swerving on the learning curve of AA's Many Paths: the story of my own intolerance

I remember moving from Montreal to Calgary in 1979, sober 2+ years. The Calgary AA culture was quite different from Montreal. How would I stay sober in the second-rate AA (my first impressions); how did they stay sober with meetings being run all wrong? I completely forgot that the Montreal meetings, familiar and comforting as a warm blanket, made me uncomfortable and foreign when I first encountered them. Change takes time. I was pretty *judgy* and I was wrong. Yes, my nostalgia was for an AA that worked, but I had not given Calgary a fair chance. I moved to Toronto five years later and, learning little, had the same experience.

So, I live in a glass house; I am not throwing stones. There's more... I spent some time fact-checking and fault-finding *Big Book* fundamentalism. I felt that there was no future in making a 1939 book sacred. I really wanted them to save time, see it my way, save AA. I spent a lot of time doing what I thought was fighting the darkness, for everyone's benefit of course. Being raised in Baby Boomer Young Peoples AA, my 60's and 70's hippy mentors had a non-authoritarian way of explaining AA. In the 1990s I started secretly feeling disappointed, whining the age-old refrain, "What's the matter with young people today?" They were doing it differently and I felt like they were doing AA wrong. They were total book-thumpers.

Hadn't they watched *Star Trek the Next Generation*? This generation of Young People's AA all sounded like the Borg, "You must assimilate: Resistance is futile." Why were they not embarrassed?

I would embarrass myself. I would try to be a good example of how much better AA could be my way. Not one youth asked me to come to their business meeting and explain what they were doing wrong. This generation were not Baby Boomers, they had different programming and they were reacting and coping with a different time, so why would they do it the way I did it? Fashions change, sometimes they cycle around and draw upon classic motifs, sometimes they blaze new ground. All of these AA ways that I found fault with, have scores of good examples of AA recovery that prove me wrong.



So, looking back now I laugh at myself. I have not outgrown a sense of what's right and what's wrong. But I do less fighting with the darkness and more shining a light. If I am right, well my home group will be attractive. And if the other group is also right, their AA will be attractive. If anyone is

getting it horribly wrong somewhere natural selection – or “a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience” if you prefer – will support the strong and repurpose the weak.

I wasn’t there at the time, but I am sure when AA was two meetings, the Akron group employed very different practices than in New York. Each group helped some and fell short with others. Wouldn’t we have improved our odds if in both places, willing newcomers could shop around? We attribute AA evolution to “a resentment and a coffee pot,” but it is more complicated than that. Many of our members get sufficiently frustrated with AA wrongness that they form new communities with new narratives of addiction and recovery and all of these, from the score of 12-step variations, to Life Ring which morphed from SOS, SMART Recovery, growing out of Rational Recovery, Dharma Recovery, who morphed out of Refuge Recovery – now both Buddhist based recovery communities are going strong – Women For Sobriety, She Recovers, Teen Addictions Anonymous, Wellbriety: the Red Road to Recovery, iPan, and there are more. Every group has some success, with some testimony of people who could not find recovery at “the other place” and are happy, connected, and useful now. Not everyone joins a peer-to-peer group to find sobriety; it could be self-sufficiency; it could be they don’t actually get/stay sober alone. Most of us need support and when many of our bridges have been burned, a Zoom room of new friends can be instrumental. But for others, at the turning point from addiction to recovery, they are rich in recovery capital: they have a supportive family, work, social, healthcare network to lean on. Many roads lead to Rome.

While it is nice to look at a broader recovery community and see that some of these life-affirming groups spawned from our AA microaggressions that drove them out, can we do better? How can the hard-learned lessons of AA past be more front-of-mind when you or I start pointing a finger at what we (and any reasonable person would) identify as a transgression that has to be purged like a cancer? Maybe we need to find a more effective way of telling these stories. Joni Mitchell’s “The Circle Game,” rhymes and it is easier to remember than Concept IX... for example.

AA World Services Inc. keeps adjusting our literature, to keep us culturally relevant. Other AA members are doing their research and writing plays, publishing books, and writing songs or creating fine art that will resonate with us in a way that, even our newest illustrated *AA Service Manual* cannot. And from our history we find timeless truths, also. We close with our favorite prophet (or scoundrel depending on your AA politics), in his naughty Victorian way of speaking, here’s Bill W, reporting on the AA circle game so long ago there was no Zoom AA or Snap-Chat. Oh, the poor barbarians.

“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!

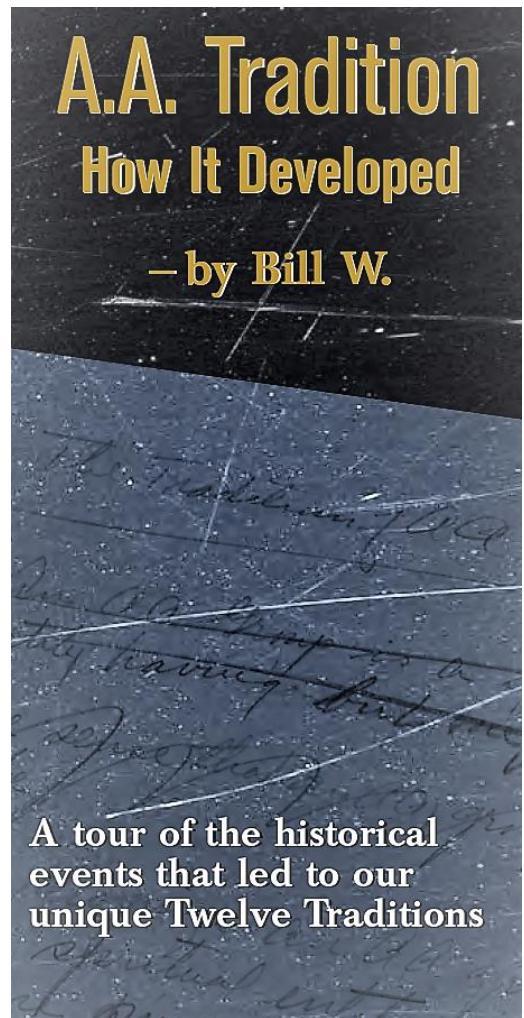
At one time or another most A.A. groups go on rule-making benders. Naturally enough, too, as a group commences to grow rapidly it is confronted with many alarming problems. ...

Gossips gossip and righteously denounce the local Wolves and Red Riding Hoods.

Newcomers argue that they are not alcoholics at all but keep coming around anyway.

‘Slippees’ trade on the fair name of A.A. in order to get themselves jobs. 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. They view with alarm for the good of the movement!

At this point the group enters the rule and regulation phase. Charters, bylaws and membership rules are excitedly passed and authority is granted committees to filter out



A tour of the historical events that led to our unique Twelve Traditions

undesirables and discipline the evildoers. Then the group elders, now clothed with authority, commence to get busy. Recalcitrants are cast into the outer darkness; respectable busybodies throw stones at the sinners. As for the so-called sinners, they either insist on staying around, or else they form a new group of their own. Or they join a more congenial and less intolerant crowd in their neighborhood. The elders soon discover that the rules and regulations are not working very well. Most attempts at enforcement generate such waves of dissension and intolerance in the group that this condition is presently recognized to be worse for the group life than the very worst that the worst ever did.

After a time fear and intolerance subside. The group survives unscathed. Everybody has learned a great deal. So it is that few of us are any longer afraid of what any newcomer can do to our A.A. reputation or effectiveness. Those who slip, those who panhandle, those who scandalize, those with mental twists, those who rebel at the program, those who trade on the A.A. reputation—all such persons seldom harm an A.A. group for long. Some of these have become our most respected and best loved. Some have remained to try our patience, sober, nevertheless. Others have drifted away. We have begun to regard these not as menaces, but rather as our teachers. They oblige us to cultivate patience, tolerance, and humility. We finally see that they are only people sicker than the rest of us, that we who condemn them are the Pharisees whose false

righteousness does our group the deeper spiritual damage. ...

Perhaps this trend signifies something much deeper than a mere change of attitude on the question of membership. Perhaps it means that we are losing all fear of those violent emotional storms which sometimes cross our alcoholic world; perhaps it bespeaks our confidence that every storm will be followed by a calm; a calm which is more understanding, more compassionate, more tolerant than any we ever knew before.”^x

As AA historians like Arthur S slip away, like Glenn C before and Ernie K in 2015, who will step up? It's not all about what happened way back when. I hope we can all record our meetings and AA communities' goings on, our challenges and triumphs. I will miss you Art. I would also like to extend my best wishes to the South Somerset group and I will follow your progress with interest; we are all in this together, going round and round and round in the circle game.

Visit RebellionDogsPublishing for past blogs, links, resources, our little history of AA and the larger recovery community in Century 21 and gems from the past that we've captured. For the podcast of this topic, [Rebellion Dogs Radio Episode 67](#)

Links...

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- ⁱ <https://rebelliondogspublishing.com/files/117299/2008-aa-population-and-ourcome-rates.pdf>
 - ⁱⁱ https://silkworth.net/aa/research-study/a-narrative-of-timeline-of-a-a-history/?_ga=2.29500406.894343368.1605523578-845694432.1594890364
 - ⁱⁱⁱ <https://pointshistory.com/2018/02/08/reply-to-arthur-s-aa-history-and-aa-myth/>
 - ^{iv} <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10361047/AA-leaders-tell-group-praying-start-meetings-Christian-focused.html>
 - ^v C58 <https://www.aa.org/aa-service-manualtwelve-concepts-world-services>
 - ^{vi} <https://www.aa.org/aa-service-manualtwelve-concepts-world-services>
 - ^{vii} <https://youtu.be/dTRKCXCOJFg>
 - ^{viii} <https://www.charismanews.com/7-news/87975-are-you-kidding-cancel-culture-now-attacks-alcoholics-anonymous-group>
 - ^{ix} https://www.christiantoday.com/article/alcoholics.anonymous.group.removed.from.directory.over.christian.empasis/137991.htm?fbclid=IwAR0yt5nvUPzzH09KgSG92_bLarDH5o-ob_aVrq_OjG4TgNnpRBguIJBlwc0
 - ^x P-17 p 10 -14 <https://www.aa.org/aa-tradition-how-it-developed>