

AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) Defense

One of the most active controversies at Freedom of Mind has concerned Alcoholics Anonymous - and I have put up some links to sites by people who are very critical of it. While I do not think AA fits my BITE model, there are some concerns raised worth discussing. I solicited a response from a person I have known for many years who credits AA for helping to overcome a drinking problem. He/She is psychologist and is quite knowledgeable about cult mind control. He/ She prefers to remain anonymous. I attempted to contact the person criticizing AA, but because he has not responded to me, I decided to refer to him in this piece as Mr. X. - Steve Hassan

I am responding to Mr. "X"'s comments about Alcoholics Anonymous, circulated in December 1999. I congratulate Mr. "X" on his success dealing with an alcohol problem, and welcome his critique. I am writing as an alcoholic who has been sober for 4 1/2 years, using the AA program, in large, but not in whole. I was appointed to the office of secretary of a large group for 6 months. I am also a Licensed Psychologist, with an expertise in cult-related issues.

Under "A REAL ALCOHOLIC?" Mr. "X" refers to what "AA-ers" say about people who have left the program and remained sober, that is, that they were not "real" alcoholics. My chief response to this is that there is no such party line. Any "AA-er" speaks entirely from his or her own opinion. There are no authority figures in AA, except temporarily elected officers, and there is most certainly no authority who would make the statement that Mr. "X" attributes to "AA-ers." Any such statement would be the private opinion of somebody who attends the AA program. Others, including myself, would be quick to express a different opinion on this issue, or have no opinion at all.

Under "NOT RELIGIOUS, ONLY SPIRITUAL!" Mr. "X" expresses confusion about the AA claim to be a spiritual, not a religious program, and goes on to say that he felt lied to. He says he does not understand the difference implied between the two terms. The difference is basically this: there is no theological doctrine whatsoever in AA. It is suggested, and NOT required, that one try to get in touch with his or her "higher power," whatever that may be, in order to help overcome the powerless feelings that most of us alcoholics experience in relation to drinking. There is no definition of that higher power. Many atheists use AA, and they often call their favorite AA meeting their higher power, in that there are many people in that meeting who simply have more knowledge and experience overcoming alcohol than the newcomer. Others simply use any symbol they choose. I knew one successfully sober man who said his higher power was the Great Pumpkin. Further, if one chooses not to buy into the higher power concept at all, that is fine. One need only to wish to stop drinking to participate in AA. I have heard many speakers say in front of their AA meetings that they do not use a higher power. No problem. This is clearly not a religion.

Under "MY SPONSOR" Mr. "X" discusses the pressure to find a sponsor for guidance. I did find my relationships with my sponsors to be profoundly valuable, both for emotional support and information. However, notice that I use the plural. First of all, I tried several temporary sponsors(which is encouraged, by the way), before I found a good fit for me. Since then, I have changed sponsors twice, as I progressed in my sobriety, and my needs changed. This is very common. In the same section, Mr."X" complains that "In AA one does not find much of Jesus

Christ!" He is right, certainly not, nor much of any other particular religious leader or prophet. This is one of AA's greatest strengths. In this passage, Mr "X" sounds like somebody looking for a religion, and being disappointed that AA is not one, rather than the other way around.

Under "THE FIRST CONFLICT" Mr. "X" says that when speakers spoke too quietly, it was AA "etiquette" not to ask the speaker to talk louder. I can only say that this has not been my experience. In every AA meeting I have been to, people have felt free to yell, "Can't hear!" or "Louder please!" in response to such a problem. The comment of Mr. "X"'s sponsor, "If God wants you to hear something, then you will hear it," is the opinion of one person, with one style, a person whom Mr. "X" himself chose. Again, there is no such party line. Mr. "X" goes on to say that this issue is related to what people in AA often say, which is that you are speaking to the group "for yourself" primarily. Yes, this is often said in AA, because it is important to emphasize that one is getting sober for oneself first, and to help others second. An analogy is how we are instructed in airplanes that if the oxygen masks drop, affix your own first, then assist someone else. In the same passage, Mr. "X" remembers that he once asked, "If Bill (an AA founder) says something, is it automatically true?" The answer is NO. Many people in AA openly disagree with various parts of Bill and Dr. Bob's philosophies, and that is just fine. If "feather fly," it is in the spirit of open disagreement and debate.

Under "90 MEETINGS IN 90 DAYS" Mr. "X" speaks of how depressing he found it to hear so many people's stories at all those meetings. I didn't quite make it to 90 meetings in 90 days, but I probably hit 60 or so. I can only say that my reaction was different. I found the stories of recovery uplifting and encouraging. It was important to me at that stage to go to many meetings, because I was in danger of slipping. These days, I go to about one a week, though that is not a recommendation or endorsement of same for anybody but myself. Again, Mr. "X" mentions his sponsor's answer to his concerns that he was "deluding" himself to think he didn't need so many meetings. Well, there are sponsors and there are sponsors. Part of the nature of AA is that if you don't like what you hear from your sponsor, pick another one.

Under "DISCREPANCIES," Mr. "X" again refers to the higher power problem, and claims he was told that everybody who stays sober eventually "converts." I' sorry if somebody actually said that to Mr. "X", but it is simply not true. I have known many old-timers, sober for decades in AA, who remained vocal agnostics or atheists.

Under "MENTALLY DISTURBED CHARACTERS" Mr. "X" refers to personality conflicts and other difficulties with individuals in certain meetings. This does happen. The solution, since AA will bar virtually nobody from meetings, is to find another meeting where you don't run into difficulties with the individuals.

Under "HOW I GOT OUT OF AA" Mr. "X" calls the people in AA meetings "completely self-centered" for their belief that "MY sobriety goes above anything else." I have discussed above the reason that this is a commonly held attitude. I will also add that in 4 1/2 years, I have found the majority, AND CERTAINLY NOT ALL, of the people I met in AA to be generous, giving, and anything but self-centered. In the same passage, Mr. "X" worries about the concept of alcoholism as a "disease." The physiological elements of alcoholism, which are probably inherited, have now been well proven and documented. The best resource I know on this subject is a very authoritative book on the medical underpinnings of alcoholism, called "Under the Influence," by

Dr. James Milam and Katherine Ketchum. However, just to show that you can choose your own beliefs in AA, I'll comment further on AA's "disease" theory, which states that in addition to being born with the physiological underpinnings, we are born with "character defects." I thoroughly reject this, and have said so to my sponsors and as a speaker at meetings. Nobody's ever given me any trouble for saying so. I believe that none of us is perfect, and that we all have some defects, that alcoholics are not born with anything extra in that regard. However, I also believe that in many if not most cases, the process of alcoholic drinking for years tends to exaggerate and reinforce whatever faults we may have. Thus, the 12-step program of self-improvement is useful in recovery.

Under "NOTHING TO LOSE" Mr. "X" states that AA's claim to attract people from all walks of life is not true, and that it would be "professional suicide" for doctors, lawyers, etc., to go to meetings. Totally untrue. I have not had any problem as a Psychologist in AA; I have known MANY other professionals in AA; in downtown Boston there is a lunchtime meeting in the business district attended almost entirely by professionals (mixed with some homeless people); and consider the numerous Hollywood celebrities who have "come out" in recent years with their addiction problems, and recovery in 12-step programs, e.g. David Carradine and many others.

Under "LIFE AFTER AA" Mr. "X" claims that "as AA has it," someone in recovery who has a sip of alcohol by mistake "can't help oneself, has a relapse, and goes on a drinking binge." AA absolutely makes no such generalization, only warns of the dangers, because it is POSSIBLE for a small taste to trigger a relapse. I, fortunately, have never had the misfortune of such a mistake, but I know many people in AA to whom that has happened, and most did not relapse, nor did they consider the mistaken sip to be a slip.

Under "CONCLUSION" Mr. "X" says, "I like many of the AA members very much. They are generally good people." Where is the writer who was saying a few paragraphs ago, "People in AA meetings are completely self-centered"? I point out this contradiction only to suggest that AA, like most organizations, has a broad spectrum of people in it, and anyone will find some to their liking, and some not. Mr. "X" goes on to state that the success rate of AA is only 5%. I don't think anyone knows for sure, but it depends on the definition of success. Never took a drink again? Basically overcame their alcoholism? Using the latter criteria, I have generally seen that people who stick with the program succeed at a higher than 50% rate, while naturally those who drop out have a somewhat lower success rate (but they are not necessarily doomed, as Mr. "X" claims AA says). Mr. "X" goes on to claim that AA is a "powerful, and cunningly clever organized enterprise." Mr. "X", find me these cunning and clever individuals.

Organized by who? Who are the cunning ones? Who benefits? AA is self-perpetuating, nobody profits financially, and nobody stays in a position of power for longer than an elected term. In most cases, one cannot even repeat a term as an officer. It has been arranged this way specifically to PREVENT the group from taking on the cult-like characteristics Mr. "X" accuses AA of. Mr. "X" says AA takes in enormous amounts of money. There has never been one substantiated accusation that these funds do anything other than pay rent for the meeting halls, buy the coffee, publish the literature which is sold for cost, pay for odds and ends like the token chips people receive for varying lengths of sobriety, and pay for very modest administrative duties. Then Mr. "X" claims that there are no acknowledged AA email groups because email groups do not take in money! This is a major misunderstanding. AA cannot officially sanction any

privately run activities like email lists, yet there are many excellent AA email lists, e.g., "Lamplighters," run selflessly by dedicated individuals to the benefit of many. Finally, Mr. "X" states that "Thousands of AA members working in the "addiction therapy industry" have jobs thanks to AA influence with the courts and institutions." Yes, of course recovering addicts can make good addiction counselors, and their experience may make them, on average, better addiction counselors than non-addicts. And I said "may." However, the insidious implication of "AA influence" is ridiculous. There is no equivalent of the "chair of the university department pulling strings for his favorite student" in AA. There are no such positions of power. The courts and institutions ARE impressed with AA because it works. It works better than any other means of overcoming alcohol that anyone has come up with yet.

All this having been said, I want to repeat that I am glad Mr. "X" has overcome his drinking problem in his way, and that he has expressed his concerns in writing. And I would be the last to suggest that AA is the only answer for everybody. But as a successful "AA-er," and as a Psychologist with an expertise in cult issues, I can guarantee that AA is not a cult, and that like many things in life, you'll get out of it what you put into it.