

Is AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) a Cult? An Old Question Revisited

© L. Allen Ragels All Rights Reserved The "alcoholism cult". That's what Sheldon Bacon, for many years the director of the Rutgers Center for Alcohol Studies, called overly avid supporters of Alcoholics Anonymous. Alcoholics Anonymous - AA as it is generally known - was started in the 1930s as a spinoff from the Oxford Group, a religious movement whose ideas were sometimes alleged to help chronic drinkers. With the aid and approval of key members of the power elite such as John D. Rockefeller, Jr., AA grew from an obscure idea to what many have come to regard as a national treasure: society's premier (practically only) way of treating alcohol, drug, and related addiction problems. By now, AA certainly must have more than a million members, with groups organized in virtually every city, town, and village, along with numerous foreign countries. Moreover, AA's core doctrine, the famous Twelve Steps, has been adopted by hundreds of parallel organizations with programs that address problems such as gambling, overeating, emotional troubles, and related family issues. Without question, AA and the Twelve Steps are among America's most well known and revered institutions. Nonetheless, assertions that AA may be a cult have been present from practically the beginning. Bacon's chiding dates from the 1940s. By the 1960s, harsher evaluations had emerged. Evaluations that were absolutely meant to be taken quite seriously and literally. "Why has AA become a cult that many men and women reverently call "the greatest movement since the birth of Christianity"?" AA critic Arthur Cain asked in 1963. AA has become a dogmatic cult whose chapters too often turn sobriety into slavery to AA, he alleged a year later. Cult or What? Cain, a writer and psychologist whose skirmishes with AA were documented in national magazines such as Harper's and the Saturday Evening Post, was perhaps the loudest, but not necessarily the first, to notice AA's resemblance to an organized cult. "We are struck by the sect or cult-like aspects of AA," alcoholists Morris E. Chafetz and Harold W. Demone, Jr. observed in 1962. "This is true in terms of its history, structure, and the charisma surrounding its leader, Bill W[ilson]." Furthermore, Chafetz and Demone asserted that: In our opinion AA is really not interested in alcoholics in general, but only as they relate to AA itself." Nor were Chafetz and Demone indisputably the first to take AA's cult-like characteristics seriously. Nearly two decades earlier, in 1944, sociologist Robert Freed Bales noted "potentially disturbing structural features of Alcoholics Anonymous. Features that, in the opinion of some, might suggest a cult mentality. Foreshadowing Chafetz and Demone, Bales found that AA had little appreciation for its individual members: it mattered little just who thought the thoughts, felt the sentiments, and performed the functions characteristic of the [groups] structure, he noted, as long as somebody did. The very perceptive Bales also saw how the charismatic quality of the

Program would be retained beyond the inevitable passing of its founders. More than a quarter of a century before the death of Wilson, AAs last surviving cofounder, Bales observed that, the magic has been transferred to The Book, Alcoholics Anonymous, apparently with a considerable degree of success. In 1964, AA again faced the charge that it harbored covert cult-like attitudes when Jerome Ellison, writing for The Nation magazine, reiterated Cain's analyses: Arthur H. Cain pointed out [AAs] tendencies toward cultism and narrow orthodoxy that limited the fellowships' therapeutic effectiveness. Ellison also quoted from letters to the editor inspired by the Cain critique: The fanatics who prevail in some groups seem bent on making AA into a hostile, fundamentalist religion, one letter writer avowed. Writing in 1989, alcoholologist and cult researcher Marc Galanter found that: From the start AA displayed characteristics of a charismatic sect: strongly felt shared belief, intense cohesiveness, experiences of altered consciousness, and a potent influence on members' behavior. . . . As in the Unification Church workshops, most of those attending AA chapter meetings are deeply involved in the group ethos, and the expression of views opposed to the group's model of treatment is subtly or expressly discouraged. The Twelve Step Alcoholism Movement In 1979, sociologist Robert Tournier raised a ruckus in professional circles when he noted that Alcoholics Anonymous has come to dominate alcoholism both as ideology and as method. . . . So successful have AA members been in proselytizing their ideas that their assumptions about the nature of alcohol dependence have virtually been accepted as fact by most of those in the field. In making this assertion, Tournier touched on an important point. AA cannot be viewed as existing in a vacuum. It is not now, and never has been, an independent standalone organization. It has always covertly supported, and been supported by, a powerful cartel of organizations that make up what historians and sociologists call the Alcoholism Movement. The original triumvirate leading this movement was AA, the National Council on Alcoholism, and the Yale Center for Alcohol Studies. Like all successful social movements, it has expanded to include many additional organizations. For greater clarification, the Alcoholism Movement could be called the Twelve Step Alcoholism Movement, after the fact that its basic philosophy is closely aligned with, and in many cases openly expressed by AAs' recovery program, the venerated Twelve Steps. To speak of AA outside of the context of the Twelve Step Alcoholism Movement is almost certainly to invite confusion. It is not just a coincidence that many organizations adhere to the same view of alcoholism and the same Twelve Step creed. It is the result of a coordinated social movement. Viewed as the Twelve Step Alcoholism Movement, rather than as a single isolated organization, the Program actually looks more cult-like and sinister. For example, AA per se does not seem to exploit its members financially, but AA-styled treatment facilities sometimes do. Witness the case of a family faced with having to sell their home in

order to pay for the mothers long-term addiction treatment after she had already been through nine expensive Twelve Step treatment regimens in just two years. In a similar vein, Twelve Step treatment units and professional addiction counselors may routinely advertise their wares without giving the slightest hint that the basic treatment they are offering is an indoctrination into AA. In 1991, Harpers Magazine printed a modernistic article on the Twelve Step Movement by David Rieff, *Victims All? Recovery, Co-dependency, and the Art of Blaming Somebody Else*. By this time, the Movement had burgeoned to include scores of anonymous programs that recommended AAs Twelve Steps for practically everyone, from compulsive workaholics to those who were told that they loved too much. As Rieff observed, any conduct that can be engaged in enthusiastically, never mind compulsively from stamp collecting to the missionary position would be one around which a recovery group could be organized. These other Twelve Step organizations are patterned after AA and share many of its characteristics. Innocuous alternatives to AA are not to be found in me-too programs such as Codependents Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Cocaine Anonymous, Adult Children of Alcoholics, Al-Anon, and so on through dozens of other anonymous/anon groups that adhere to the basic Twelve Step ethos. To the degree that they mimic AA, what is said regarding AA may be universalized to apply to other Twelve Step programs. *Mind Control Two* book-length polemics directly addressing the AA-as-cult issue appeared in 1991 and 1992. The more strongly written of the two, the enigmatically titled *More Revealed* by Ken Ragge, bluntly portrayed AA as a mind-control cult. The Twelve Step support groups . . . will make every effort to convince the person he is powerless, insane, incompetent, the group is God and he must work the program one day at a time, Ragged noted. The most outstanding characteristic of these [AA] people is their intensely held belief in the goodness of AA and the badness of self. The other publication, *Alcoholics Anonymous: Cult or Cure* by Charles Bufe, was more moderate. Bufe concluded that AA is not a cult, though it does have dangerous cult-like tendencies. Neither Ragge nor Bufe seems to have been aware of a very pertinent article written in 1984 by two astute Californians, Francesca Alexander and Michele Rollins. Alexander and Rollins, both sociologists, went underground in order to understand the world of the Steps as seen through the eyes of actual group participants. [B]oth investigators attended AA meetings over a period of several months, they recounted. In addition, one of the investigators actively assumed the role of an alcoholic . . . she admitted to members of an AA gathering that she was ostensibly an alcoholic in need of help. She then chose a sponsor and began to attend both official meetings and informal social gatherings. The result of this clandestine effort was a decisive study published in *California Sociologist*, *Alcoholics Anonymous: The Unseen Cult*. Essentially, Alexander and Rollins measured AA against criteria developed by Robert J. Lifton, whose 1961 work,

Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism, is a classic work on thought reform or brainwashing. Measured against Liftons standards, Alexander and Rollins concluded that AA is indeed a cult. AA uses all the methods of brain washing, which are also the methods employed by cults, they found. It is our contention that AA is a cult. Based on their field notes of actual meetings, Alexander and Rollins provided illustrations of AAs use of the thought reform techniques identified by Lifton. The specific techniques are these: Milieu control This category refers to group dominance over the individuals environment. Wherever possible, the proselyte is put in a position where his or her reality will be defined and interpreted solely by other cult members. As examples of milieu control, Alexander and Rollins cited statements heard at AA meetings such as: Dont have any emotional entanglements (outside of AA) your first year. And: My first sponsor told me to change my job [and] move, told me that I should choose someone from the group to be my husband . . . Since they were studying AA itself, not the Twelve Step Alcoholism Movement in its entirety, Alexander and Rollins did not observe that the really intense version of milieu control is to be found in residential Twelve Step treatment facilities, where confined convalescents are routinely isolated from all outside contact for weeks or longer. Milieu control may also be found in AAs strategy of encouraging neophytes to attend ninety meetings in ninety days. Needless to say, a proselyte who works every day, and attends AA meetings every night, will have little time for anything else. Mystical manipulation This technique also involves personal and social orchestrations, oftentimes through the use of ritual. AAs rituals are not elaborate, but they do exist. Every meeting is opened and closed with a group prayer. Certain pages from AAs basic text, its Big Book, are read at every meeting. Probably AAs most powerful ritual is the well known I am an alcoholic confession. Any member who wishes to speak is required to first utter the phrase My name is _____ and I am an alcoholic, thereby affirming his or her identity with the group. Above all else, Alexander and Rollins explained, the neophyte is asked to trust the group. As an example of mystical manipulation, Alexander and Rollins quoted a converted AA member: I was in the same room with 3,100 sober alcoholics, all holding hands and saying the Lords Prayer. It was an extremely spiritual experience. Had Alexander and Rollins been able to expand their study, reference to AAs recommended literature would have revealed that far from being asked simply to trust the group, newcomers to AA are solemnly invited to regard the group as God. You can if you wish, make AA itself your higher power, an official AA publication counsels. (The phrase higher power being AAs generic term for God.) You can hardly ask anyone to be more trusting than that. Demand for purity According to Alexander and Rollins, demand for purity has to do with always viewing ones behavior through the lens of the groups supposedly perfect doctrine. Since no one can achieve this level of observance, inevitable feelings of contrition and self-contempt are

provoked. Among the examples Alexander and Rollins gave for this particular thought-control strategy are statements such as: due to the pain of not following the steps, I came to the point where I do now And: You may not want to give [control] to anyone that is a character defect thinking that you are that special Demand for purity may also be found in the tenth edict of AAs Twelve Steps: Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it. A charge strongly suggesting that the lowly member will never completely live up to the perfection of AAs Program. Cult of confession The ritual of confession, or the public admission of shortcomings, has been an important part of AAs liturgy from the very beginning. It is a technique that AA inherited from its religious progenitor, the Oxford Group, later renamed Moral Re-armorment. In fact, Robert J. Lifton himself, in his original study of thought reform methods in China, noted that a Protestant missionary was struck by [thought reforms] similarity with the Moral Re-armorment movement in which he had been active. To demonstrate the occurrence of this technique, Alexander and Rollins quoted such indiscreet disclosures as: I modeled for porno photos to get money for booze. And: I tried to stab people, shoot at people, hit them with a pan In AA meetings, speakers are expected to qualify, or give enough of their stories to show that they, too, are alcoholics. In AAs Step Program, the cult of confession is embodied in the Fifth Step: Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs. Some groups have made it a standard practice for the novice to take this step with an AA sponsor, a senior member of the group. Of course, this is a dramatic gesture of the surrender of self to AA. Sacred science The sacred science stratagem evokes an aura of irrefutable, unquestionable, correctness about the groups central dogma. AA, for example, holds itself to be in possession of certain knowledge regarding the disposition of alcoholism and the effectiveness of the Steps. Alexander and Rollins documented this by quoting members statements such as: Ive been following the steps, and the promises about what would happen are true. Indeed, AA seems to be a first-class example of Liftons observation that in thought control, proponents contend that mans ideas (but not man) can be God. Note, however, that AAs techniques may be subtle. There arent any musts in this program, newcomers are told, but there are a lot of you betters. A major piece of AA literature, though, puts the matter more directly. Although the program is supposedly voluntary and the Step mere suggestions, AA cofounder Bill Wilson wrote that, unless each AA member follows to the best of his ability our suggested Twelve Steps of recovery, he almost certainly signs his own death warrant We must obey certain principles or we die. Heavy stuff. Obey AA or die from drinking. The principles that must be obeyed, of course, are the invulnerable truths of Alcoholics Anonymous. Loading the language This refers to the technique of replacing common words with slang and clichés that are slanted to express the groups prejudices and beliefs. Alexander

and Rollins noted examples such as Hes taking a geographic (AAs slang for an attempt to deal with problem drinking by moving to a new locality). And she . . . addressed me as her baby (AAs belittling term for a novice). Illustrations of AAs special lingo could practically be multiplied to infinity. For example: Twelfth Step call (a mission undertaken for the purpose of recruiting a new member); old-timer (a senior member); bleeding deacon (an unhappy old-timer); stinkin thinkin (any disagreement with AA); on a dry drunk (being simultaneously sober and in disagreement with AA); on the pity pot (indulging in self-pity; not being grateful for AA) and so on. AAs famous slogans also enter into consideration here. Slogans such as: keep it simple; easy does it; one day at a time; let go and let God. Almost everyone who has interacted with AA has been impressed by the way that these sayings manage to replace original thought, which is no-doubt why Lifton referred to their ilk as the thought-terminating cliché. Doctrine over person For practical purposes, this thought control mechanism refers to the retrospective reinterpretation of the neophytes past so that it conforms to the doctrines of the group. For example, Alexander and Rollins remarked on such statements as: I find that Im remembering little things from my past . . . that all have to do with how I became the person I was. Likewise, it is common for AA members to say I was an alcoholic from the first drink, or I was born an alcoholic. Note how psychiatrist and Twelve Step enthusiast E. J. Khantzian reported on the progress of one of his patients: He said he realized now that he probably was an addict before he touched a drink. In Khantzians view, that was progress; the patient was recovering. Ironically and naively Khantzian used this case as the basis for an article purporting to show that Alcoholics Anonymous is not a cult, although he admitted, some aspects of AA might border on the cultish. In the Twelve Steps, retrospective reinterpretation is also found in the Fourth directive: Made a fearless and searching moral inventory of ourselves. According to Ragge, the moral inventory is much more than a written confession of sins. In preparation for writing out the inventory, evil is redefined according to the AA world view. In writing, one redefines oneself, and ones past, in the AA image. Dispensing existence This is Liftons term for the phenomenon whereby group insiders are plainly distinguished, made to feel different, and set apart from nonmembers or outsiders. The idea that so-called alcoholics are fundamentally different from the rest of humanity is a mainstay of the Alcoholism Movement, and AA goes to great lengths to ensure that its members accept and retain their special identity. Many of AAs rituals are aimed at reinforcing that idea. Alexander and Rollins illustrated this with quotations such as: People not in AA are Normies (normal people as opposed to alcoholics). According to Clarence Snyder, one of AAs pioneer members, alcoholics are different from people. AA members have been known to express the belief that they are a Chosen People, which presumably makes those who are not AA the Normies nonchosen. John C. Mellon,

apparently a fervent AA member, has even written a scholarly book, Mark as Recovery Story, suggesting that Alcoholics Anonymous itself should be regarded as the second coming of Jesus Christ. Love bombing and family substitution To Liftons original eight mind control methods, Alexander and Rollins appended love bombing and family substitution. They considered these together because they found that love bombing was used as the instrument whereby family substitution could be expedited. Love bombing refers to an ostensibly absolute and unconditional acceptance offered to the proselyte. As Alexander and Rollins explained: The neophyte is repeatedly told, Only we can love you, and understand you. We are like you, and know what your life is really like. This is the only place you really belong. Among the illustrations cited by Alexander and Rollins are some that are particularly good examples of love bombing: One of the incredible things about AA is the fact that you will be loved unconditionally . . . And family substitution: my sponsor . . . told me that she and the others would take my sisters place. You have to cut off from your family and turn them over to God. Recovery or Mind Control? Considering all this, is AA a cult? Does the Program rely on mind control? Those who are recovering in AA, or who have had loved ones join the Program, are understandably reluctant to see anything untoward in the organization they feel has benefitted them immeasurably. But AA has been labeled a cult, not just by its calumniators and critics, but by some of its sincerest friends and supporters. AA friend William Madsen, for example, compared AA to the nineteenth century Ghost Dance Cults and the Cargo Cults of Melanesia. George E. Vaillant, a researcher, psychiatrist and a supporter of AA acknowledged that AA certainly functions as a cult and systemically indoctrinates its members in ways common to cults the world over. To a certain extent, this has been recognized by AA members themselves with a witticism that has become another one of their many clichés: If AA uses brainwashing, then our brains must need to be washed. Does AA use brainwashing, more properly known as mind control? Is AA a mind control environment? The answer is yes. AA uses all of the methods of mind control, which are also the methods used by cults. ----- NOTES AND

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