



Spirituality & 'God-Talk'

Chair of AA's General Service Board asks if AAs are welcoming enough to all beliefs
From a talk given at the October 2009 AA General Service Board meeting

Membership in AA is clearly defined by the Third Tradition, "The only requirement for AA membership is a desire to stop drinking." So why are we concerned about people feeling included or excluded? Everyone who desires to stop drinking should feel included ... right? However, AA is a spiritual program, and many newcomers, if not most, are put off by the talk of God and God's will and turning one's will and life over to God as we understand him.

As I listen to people's stories, I find much of that discomfort comes from the damage religion has done to the alcoholic who is still drinking. Many come bearing loads of guilt that has been reinforced by churches that are all too ready to judge, advise and condemn. However the judgment comes, to the person still struggling with alcoholism, it is fuel for resentment, guilt and despair. Then to walk into a meeting and hear God-talk...! We understand.

Also, those who do not have a traditional theistic view of God hear language about a God that sounds very traditional. If one is an atheist or an agnostic, it can be difficult to hear all this language. The first premise in theology is that God is beyond human understanding. God is not an object like an apple, or even a person. We who are religious need to be more conscious that we speak of God in allegorical language. We must always welcome those who find this language unconvincing.

One place to begin addressing this concern is by making a distinction between religion and spirituality.

Organized or "institutionalized" religion has a set of beliefs that form a core theology. Most churches codify these beliefs into some kind of dogma or creed, even if they do not use the word "dogma." There is an organizational structure, often hierarchical, dominated by the ordained clergy; a regular, even regulated, style of worship; and ethical implications based on the belief system—some "don'ts" and some "do's." Sometimes this ethic seems to represent a program for perfection. Generally these aspects of religion represent boundaries that define who the members are—who is in and who is out.

As you all know, I am an ordained Episcopal priest and head of one of our denomination's theological seminaries. I only ask that you not assume I am identical with every religious leader you have ever known. I have serious difficulty with the idea of defining who's in and who's out; we can't see into the soul of any human being. But the greatest difficulty I have with the institutional church is with the claim of knowing the truth. Anyone who has studied theology knows that "truth" has changed dramatically over the ages. This claim to know the truth plays a central role in the churches' developing a view of us verses them. At its worst it has led to witch hunts, inquisitions and persecutions; at its best it leads to hypocrisy and arrogance. I believe it is this claim that encourages within religion the desire to control and the spirit of perfectionism.

"Spiritual," on the other hand, is broad and inclusive. "Spiritual realities" represent all those things that affect our lives but which we cannot see or touch—things like love, resentment, hope, anger, peace, anxiety or serenity. Spiritual realities are present for all human beings. Spirituality has nothing to do with boundaries or with "in groups" and "out groups."

Without question the Twelve Steps lay out a spiritual program, but it is a spirituality based on experience, not doctrine. As the Big Book says, “The spiritual life is not a theory. We have to live it.” Central in the spirituality of AA is mystery, not doctrine—mystery at the miracle of lives changed by following these simple principles.

For me, as I seek to sort through all the stuff of institutionalized religion, one tool I use is to seek my personal, basic, core experience. When I do that, I become free, free to let go of the need to protect God, free to let go of the need to control, free of the need to judge others.

As part of preparing this sharing, I decided to do a meditation, asking, What are the spiritual principles of AA? I offer these thoughts, not as dogmatic truth, but simply as reflections by one who has learned and grown from this program.

I believe the fundamental spiritual experience is the movement away from being self-directed—I can control my drinking, I am strong, I need to control you—toward being directed by a power greater than self. “First of all,” Bill says, “we had to quit playing God. It didn’t work.” This represents what those of us who use religious language call “humility.” It is a movement toward recognition that we are not God, we cannot control our life or the lives of others, and that seeking such control actually makes life unmanageable. It is a movement toward accepting that we must find a new way of living that is directed by a Higher Power. And the term “Higher Power” within the AA Fellowship means simply that which keeps one sober.

As I listen to your stories, I discover that the beginning of such spirituality is hope. When one attends that first meeting, it is hope that starts him or her on the journey toward sobriety and new life. That means the fundamental faith for members of AA is the hope that today they can live sober lives. In other words, faith is the acceptance that there is hope. And the fundamental act of faith is showing up for meetings. If someone comes to a meeting, that person is acting in faith; that person is spiritual.

From the very beginning—even before AA began, when Bill W. and Ebby had that well-known conversation and Bill vowed he would never get religion—from the very beginning religion and spirituality have been issues for the Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous. Fortunately, for all who have been strengthened by this program, the spirituality of AA has remained pragmatic. God is that Higher Power that keeps us sane today; hope is based on our experience; and faith is seen when one shows up for meetings.

For those of us who are comfortable with traditional language for God, we must remember others are not so comfortable; the language is not all that important. What is important for those who are members of this Fellowship and for those who walk through the door for the first time is to be able to discover the hope that is the spiritual foundation that will bring sanity and serenity to his or her life. Clearly such spirituality welcomes all who desire to stop drinking.

Ward Ewing
Chair, General Service Board

Copyright © The AA Grapevine, Inc. (April 2010). Reprinted with permission.