

A.A., the “Higher Powers,” and the New Thought Compromise

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My Search for the Curious Nonsense “gods” Floating Around Recovery Talk

As many know by now, my searches for the history of A.A. began when a young man told me when I was three years sober that A.A. had come from the Bible. I told him I had never heard such a thing in the thousand or more meetings I had attended. He then suggested I read the A.A. General Service Conference-approved book, *DR. BOB and the Good Oldtimers*; Which I did. And the young man was right.

Then, as many have also heard, I realized that A.A. had many roots. Some had never been researched. Some were scarcely known in the Fellowship. Some had systematically and intentionally been discarded; or, at best, they had been distorted.

By 2000, I was speaking at the archives meeting of the A.A. International Convention in Minneapolis. I reviewed for the large audience A.A.’s roots in the Bible, in the Oxford Group, in the writings of Rev. Samuel Shoemaker, in Anne Smith’s personal journal, in *Quiet Time*, and in the literature of Dr. Bob’s own library. But there was much more to be learned.

By the end of the next decade, I had researched and identified many more roots—some large in importance, some mythical or incomplete as they had been reported, some virtually unknown, and some correctly highlighted. These included Dr. William D. Silkworth, Professor William James, Dr. Carl Gustav Jung, the Salvation Army, the Young People’s Society of Christian Endeavor, the Young Men’s Christian Association (the YMCA), gospel rescue missions, conversions, and the evangelists like Dwight Moody, Ira Sankey, F.B. Meyer, and Billy Sunday.

But by that time, critics of A.A. were pumping out new assertions and assumptions. They pointed to New Thought as the basis for A.A. They pointed to spiritualism as the basis for A.A. They pointed to Bill Wilson’s obsession with adultery and LSD as evidence of imbalance. They even claimed that Free Masonry had put its nose under the tent of A.A. Little documentation, but lots of attacks. Critics also made stronger arguments that A.A. was not for Christians, that it was the product of “automatic writing,” and that it amounted to “twelve steps to destruction.” Most important, they claimed that no Christian could fellowship with other AAs based on what they termed biblical injunctions. Strangely, some critics recognized that those who mentioned God, His Son Jesus Christ, the Bible, and religion in A.A. were often intimidated and denounced by a few “bleeding deacons” who cited “the Traditions” and “Conference-approved” status as supposed authority for their remarks. And these objections fostered new Christian fellowships like Celebrate Recovery.

Along the way, I was asked to publish a study of all the “nonsense gods” that had crept into the A.A. picture—idols like a “Higher Power,” “a Power greater than ourselves,” “God as we understood Him,” and one’s “own conception of God”. Plus some 50 or more other absurd

names for the new deity of A.A. that ranged from light bulbs to the Big Dipper to a rock to Mighty Mouse—not Mickey, but Mighty! And, to explain as much as I had found to that time, I published *God and Alcoholism: Our Growing Opportunity in the 21st Century* in 2002.

Still, the clamor against A.A., by a few Christians, by many atheists and humanists, and by many many disgruntled AAs—not to leave out “erudite scholars” seeking to change the recovery movement—increased and reached far beyond the light that was shining.

The Increasing Body of Evidence about Modern Recovery’s Nonsense “Higher Powers”

Many years ago, I accurately identified the fact that it was mostly the New Thought writers who had invented the “higher power” idea as an integral part of their theology.

Their curious chain of effort began around 1900 with Ralph Waldo Trine and Professor William James. It grew with the Emmanuel Movement. And it reached a temporary peak in the writings of Emmet Fox. But these elements were just seed planters as far as the revision of recovery ideas was concerned. Successors to and admirers of the early planters somehow believed they could fertilize and propagate widely the idea that higher powers, not-gods, and pseudo “spirituality” were an integral part of the origins and history of A.A. and effective recovery.

In another article just posted on my main blog (www.mauihistorian.blogspot.com), I listed all the subsequent advocates of some peculiar higher power, strange spirituality, and absurd names for a god. These folks were not all New Thought advocates. To their ranks I added an occasional Oxford Group writing, an occasional remark by Rev. Shoemaker, numerous theories by a few A.A. historians, and lots of inventions by counselors, clergy, and AAs themselves.

But there remained the puzzling question: Why did Bill Wilson use such strange synonyms for what he openly acknowledged was the power of the Creator? In the process, Bill capitalized all sorts of strange names, and he put them in his writings. He also left a state of total confusion about what these strange new gods were and what they could do for the alcoholic who still suffers.

The Best Early Resource for the Wilson Language that I Have Thus Far Found

Ralph Waldo Trine was a New Thought writer who published *In Tune with the Infinite*. Trine may have been the first to invent this new “Higher Power.” But even Trine never seems to have stooped to calling his higher power a light bulb, the Big Dipper, Something, Ralph, or “not-god.”

Recently, however, I stumbled upon the following book Trine published in 1917. Here is the citation: Ralph Waldo Trine, *The Higher Powers of Mind and Spirit* (New York: Dodge Publishing Company, 1917). And it is filled with data which foreshadowed Bill Wilson’s love affair with New Thought writing and idolatrous language.

Here are some ideas which can provide homework for those who wonder about strange A.A. Big Book language—language that never came from the Bible, but was usually capitalized to

indicate it referred to “God,” and was curiously accompanied by all sorts of quotes from the Bible and references to the Creator, Almighty God, Jesus Christ, and the Bible itself.

The “Higher Power” That Ralph Waldo Trine Promoted

Here are some references by Trine to “this higher power”:

. . . we open our lives so that this Higher Power can work definitely in and through us. [p. 40]

. . . guidance of this higher wisdom and in all forms of expression to act and to work augmented by this higher power. [p. 166]

Here are some of the sources for ideas that Trine mentioned in support of his characterizations:

Our own William James, he so splendidly related psychology, philosophy, and even religion, to life in a supreme degree, honored his calling and did a tremendous service for all. [p. 9]

Containing a fundamental truth deeper perhaps than we realize, are these words of that gifted seer, Emmanuel Swedenborg: There is only one Fountain of Life, and the life of man is a stream there from, which if it were not continuously replenished from its source would instantly cease to flow. [p. 33]

The Emmanuel Movement in Boston in connection with Emmanuel Church . . . is an attestation of this. That most valuable book . . . *Religion and Medicine*. [p. 142]

[the higher power] is making actual the proposition enunciated by Emerson . . . [p. 166— This was a reference to Ralph Waldo Emerson who some have claimed was the author of the whole “New Thought Movement.”]

And if you are wondering how a few Christian A.A. critics have managed to tar and feather A.A. as spiritualist and an offspring of Emmet Fox (an adherent of New Thought), just look at the roster of Trine’s New Thought advocates—William James, Emmanuel Swedenborg, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. And at least two of these had in fact dabbled in spiritualism. Just as Bill Wilson himself had through having been introduced to Swedenborgian ideas by his marriage to and the family of Lois Burnham Wilson, his wife. The erring Christian critics ignored the plain teachings of the New Testament that “even” Christians walked in the flesh, were carnal in their meanderings, and violated God’s commandments. See Romans, Chapter 8, for example. But Wilson’s vagaries—ranging from New England Congregationalism in his youth to atheist thinking to Swedenborgian influences to born-again Christianity at the Mission to spiritualism to Roman Catholic doctrine to psychic experiments—could not alter A.A. or even Wilson’s status as a Christian, which came from his decision for Jesus Christ at Calvary Mission—the validity of which is for God and God alone to judge—not some anti-A.A. Christian writer.

And here are some of Trine's own capitalized deity names along with other ideas that so typically seemed to invite Wilson's creation of unique and strange new gods and a supposed relationship with them:

Infinite Power [p. 10]

Life Force of all objective material forms [p. 10]

The Supreme Intelligence God [p. 11]

Divine Wisdom . . . Divine Power . . . Divine Voice [no page number given]

Voice of the Spirit [no page number given]

Eternal Divine Life . . . Divine Being [p. 25]

. . . eternal, Unity. . . This Unity is God. All things have come from the Divine Unity [p. 29]

God-consciousness [pp. 33, 91]

Let's look at Wilson's capitalized "gods" whose presence is still extant in one form or another in the fourth edition of *Alcoholics Anonymous*, published in 2001:

Creative Intelligence, Universal Mind . . . Spirit of Nature . . . Czar of the Heavens [p. 12]

Power beyond ourselves . . . Supreme Being . . . Power greater than ourselves [p. 46]

All Powerful, Guiding, Creative Intelligence [p. 49]

Spirit of the Universe [p. 52]

Great Reality deep down within us [p. 55]

Presence of Infinite Power and Love [p. 56]

Our Director . . . the Principal . . . new Employer [pp. 61-62]

Great Fact [p. 164]

These man-made deities can simply not be found in the King James Version of the Bible that early AAs studied prior to publication of the Big Book in April 1939.

Were these new gods? New names for a "god?" Wilson's own self-made "god?" Or lingo that he had picked up from his association with William James, Swedenborg, and Fox writings? I don't know.

What we do know is that Wilson *also* placed a far greater emphasis on biblical descriptions of God—as God is known or described in the Bible from which Dr. Bob said the basic ideas of the Twelve Steps had come. Originally, there were no absurd names for God in the Steps. And the Big Book refers to Almighty God with biblical descriptions many many many times—e.g., “God,” “Creator,” “Maker,” “Father of Lights,” “Father,” and “Heavenly Father.”

But the duality of references—some New Thought and some biblical—clearly opened a door to what Wilson called the “broad highway” which he paved when he deleted “God” from Steps Two, Three, and Eleven just before the first edition of the Big Book went to print. And Wilson himself made it clear he created the Step duality to appease atheists and agnostics. [See, for example, the photo of the hand-written notes and amendments in the “printer's manuscript of the Big Book found in *The Book That Started It All: The Original Working Manuscript of Alcoholics Anonymous* (Center City, MN: Hazelden, 2010), page 58. See also Bill's explanation on pages 166-67 of *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age* that the substitution of “a Power greater than ourselves” for “God” in Step Two, and the addition of the modifying phrase “*as we understood Him*” (emphasis in the original) to “God” in Steps Three, and Eleven were changes made to assuage atheists and agnostics.] Bill seemed to lay the primary responsibility for those major changes in the Twelve Steps at the feet of his partner, Henry Parkhurst, claiming that Parkhurst “had come to believe in some sort of ‘universal power.’” [*Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, p. 163]

And Bill's wife, Lois Wilson, confirmed that a “universal” program had been agreed upon. In fact, her comments indicated a leaning in that direction. In *Lois Remembers: Memoirs of the Co-founder of Al-Anon and Wife of the Co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous* (NY: Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, Inc., 1987), Lois made the following remarks:

The pros and cons were mostly about the tone of the book. Some wanted it slanted more toward the Christian religion; others, less. Many alcoholics were agnostics and atheists. Then there were those of the Jewish faith and, around the world, of other religions. Shouldn't the book be written so that it would appeal to them also? Finally, it was agreed that the book should present a universal spiritual program, not a specific religious one, since all drunks were not Christian. [p. 113]

Then, near the close of 1935, the powers-that-be behind the Calvary Mission forbade the alcoholic boys living there to come to the Clinton Street meetings, saying that Bill and I were “not maximum.” This not only hurt us but left us disappointed in the group's leadership. . . . In spite of the rebuff, Bill and I were not immediately discouraged with the Oxford Group as a whole. . . . But in the summer of 1937 Bill and I stopped going to OG meetings. [p. 103]

God, through the Oxford Group, had accomplished in a twinkling what I had failed to do in seventeen years. One minute I would get down on my knees and thank God . . . , and the next moment I would throw things about and cuss the Oxford Group. [p. 99]

I felt I already had the knowledge and discipline these kinds of folks were seeking. [p. 98]

Bill belonged to a team for a while, but I didn't. [p. 93]

I felt no personal need for their teachings. I had had a sound spiritual training [from her Swedenborgian family and church]. . . I did not think I needed the Oxford Group. [p. 91]

As for me, I had never believed in emotional conversions. [p. 88]

I tried to get the Y to send me abroad as an aide to the wounded. . . . But the National Board of the YWCA refused because of my religion. Their letter of rejection stated that Swedenborgians (the sect to which I belonged) and Unitarians were not considered Christians! . . . This seemed to me not only narrow but illogical, a "non-Christian" could instruct children but could not aid wounded soldiers. [p. 26]

It will be for others to decide how much Lois' background and prejudices influenced Bill Wilson's eventual surrender to universalism. This surrender had taken place despite Bill's Christian upbringing as a youngster in Vermont, his conversion to God through Jesus Christ at Calvary Mission, and his active participation in the Bible studies, prayer meetings, required conversions, and Quiet Times in Akron. But then there were Lois's Swedenborgian convictions (including those perhaps pertaining to the Wilson obsession with spiritualism); Lois's distaste for conversions; her resentments against the Christian ideas of the Oxford Group; and the strange omission of mention of A.A.'s biblical roots and practices. These certainly could have added fuel to the fire for the last-minute compromise that resulted in the major changes relating to "God" made in Steps Two, Three, and Eleven, and opened up the "broad highway" to multiple gods and no God that swept into A.A. as the years went by.

Note also that in *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, Bill had said of the Episcopal clergyman Sam Shoemaker: "It was from him that Dr. Bob and I in the beginning had absorbed most of the principles that were afterward embodied in the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous" (p. 39). And, before he yielded at the last minute to the urgings of his partner Henry Parkhurst, Bill said:

We were still arguing about the Twelve Steps. All this time I had refused to budge on these steps. I would not change a word of the original draft, in which, you will remember, I had consistently used the word "God," and in one place the expression "on our knees" was used. . . . Though at first I would have none of it, we finally began to talk about the possibility of compromise. [*Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, pp. 166-67]

And sadly, the compromises that resulted moved many away from the God of the Bible through the years since the Big Book was first published.

Is All This Confusion Fuel for Condemning A.A.? Absolutely Not!

For many it is. For others in A.A., it all seems perfectly normal. Settling for a "convenient" God or an "expedient" God is okay with them. One thing we know is that many AAs don't know Who God is, or

how to “find” Him, or to Whom they are supposed to pray. Is it the Creator? Is it a rock? Is it Somebody? Is it Santa Claus? Is it the Great Fact? Is it the Spirit of the Universe? Is it Creative Intelligence? Is it Ralph? Is it Gertrude? Is it a tree? Or is it a light bulb? For all these absurd names keep popping up—regularly!

If Dr. Bob were still alive, he would be focusing on God, his Heavenly Father. If Bill Wilson were still alive, who knows? If a few want to condemn A.A. because of some strange ideas emanating from Trine, Swedenborg, James, and Fox, so be it. But for me, there was a clear challenge based on the history of A.A. itself to find out and report the role of God, His Son Jesus Christ, and the Bible in the A.A. that was founded and flourished before the nonsense gods made their mysterious and confusing entrance into “recovery.”

Some of us still want to help drunks. Some of us came into A.A. as drunks and were helped by AAs. Some of us saw the clear promise in A.A.’s Big Book that God could do for us what we could not do for ourselves. Lots of us have learned by experience what God actually can do. Lots of us do not support those who talk of the gods of Ralph Waldo Trine, spiritualism, and some “scholar’s” linguistic manufacture. More and more of us are becoming part of a current, growing movement to report and talk about the deeds, healings, power, forgiveness, and love of the one true living God.

My own experience is that a newcomer (properly armed with the same power of which Dr. Bob spoke—“Your Heavenly Father”) has little or no taste for or interest in relying on rocks, trees, light bulbs, or idols. The malady is too serious; the consequences unchecked are too disastrous; and the stakes too high to warrant playing around with a man-made creation that couldn’t answer the prayer of a cricket.

Those who today argue that A.A. is not Christian are right. Those who argue that no Christians should be in A.A. are patently ignorant of the thousands and thousands of Christians who participate in A.A. They don’t know AAs’ own ignorance of the great compromise based on the fears of Wilson, the prejudice of Parkhurst, or the influence of Bill’s wife. A compromise that has caused many to stop helping drunks rely on Almighty God for their recovery.

The revisionists patently ignore the fact that today the Red Cross, the United Way, the YMCA, the Armed Forces, the Congress, and the Constitution authorize no litmus test that will bar either Christians or non-Christians from the service work that all constantly render. Isolation and prohibition will not stop the devil’s intrusion, nor can they stop the work of Almighty God—with Whom nothing is impossible.

Gloria Deo