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Originally titled simply “Twelve-Step Programs,” this piece was requested by Peter H. VanNess, editor of the Spirituality and the Secular Quest volume (#22) of World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest, General Editor Ewert Cousins, New York: Crossroad, 1996. It is a bit more free-wheeling than most of my other presentations, in part because of being directed to a wider audience that evidence suggested held many misconceptions about Twelve-Step programs and specifically Alcoholics Anonymous.

Whatever Happened to Twelve-Step Programs?

by Ernest Kurtz

Some time in 1990, reported *New York Times* religion writer Peter Steinfels, a cleric showing his church to a visitor confided: “There is more spirituality in this building on Tuesday evenings in the basement than on Sunday mornings in the sanctuary.”¹ What went on in that and countless other church basements on weekday evenings were meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous and other groups, often termed “Twelve-Step groups” because derived from or in some way imitative of A.A.

Even though not all such meetings take place in church basements, there is a problem with this modern version of “upstairs-downstairs.” As the decade of the nineties unfolded, many

challenged its insight. What had won grudging respect as an effective way of making available time-tested spiritual insight came increasingly to be criticized as a form of New Age religion or mocked as a manifestation of psychologizing fads.² Where, then, do Twelve-Step programs fit in a study of spirituality and the secular quest?

The term *Twelve-Step Programs* denotes groups of people who seek to put into practice the “Twelve Steps” formulated and introduced by Alcoholics Anonymous between 1935 and 1939. The term also connotes to many the plethora of therapeutic-spiritual hybrids that have more recently sprung up in the wake of the “human potential” or “New Age” movements. Because some of these present themselves, or are perceived to be, manifestations of Twelve-Step insight, we must begin with a distinction. The distinction is between those programs and groups that emphasize putting into practice the literal Twelve Steps, and those other programs and groups that focus their language and practice elsewhere, whether the source of that different thrust be esoteric or psychological.

That distinction is rarely so precise in mushy reality. Not even all gatherings listed as meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous, for example, fall into the first category. Practice, not labels, must guide. What actually occurs within any program or group is more important than how that reality is named. The line between the Twelve-Step and apparently related approaches may be blurry, but the differences are real. More importantly, because the difference is, at bottom, between, on the one hand, a modern reformulation of classic spiritual insight, and, on the other, a classic denial of traditional spirituality, the real story is **how** the one engendered the other.

There is a help for exploring that story, for distinguishing between genuine Twelve-Step programs and other ventures sometimes confused with them. Programs imbued with the spirit of the Twelve Steps are also Twelve-Tradition programs, adhering to the Twelve Traditions also originally set forth by Alcoholics Anonymous. The Twelve Steps shape the spirituality of participants

in groups that set forth such programs; the Twelve Traditions shape the groups, making them apt vehicles for conveying Twelve-Step spirituality. After an exploration of the Twelve Steps, then, we shall examine also the significance of the Twelve Traditions.

The Twelve Steps

Any understanding of Twelve-Step programs must rest on some knowledge of the Steps as originally set forth by Alcoholics Anonymous. A.A.'s Twelve Steps begin with the word, “We,” which remains implicit at the beginning of each Step. The less important reason for the ‘We’ is its implication of community, a facet we shall explore later. More significant to A.A.'s earliest members was their presentation of these Steps not as prescription, but as description: “Here are the Steps we took, which are suggested as a program of recovery”; so begins the actual listing of the Twelve Steps in the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*. The Steps do not set rules; they relate experience.

A.A.'s First Step reads: “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol — that our lives had become unmanageable.” In commenting on this Step, A.A. co-founder Bill Wilson spoke of “absolute humiliation” and “utter defeat”: “The principle that we shall find no enduring strength until we first admit complete defeat is the main taproot from which our whole society has sprung and flowered.”³ This understanding recaptured an ancient insight: classic vocabulary speaks of “emptying” (κενωσις) and of crying “out of the depths.” Alcoholics Anonymous finds the beginning of recovery from alcoholism in the process of “hitting bottom.” The admission of limitation, and, specifically, of the insufficiency of self-control — this is the beginning of Twelve-Step spirituality.

Despite the prominence of the word *believe* in the second of the Twelve Steps — “Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity” — the stories told within Twelve-Step programs reveal that this Step deals less with faith than with **hope**. The point of the Second Step, according to co-founder Wilson's

expatiation in *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, is encouragement to open-mindedness to new possibilities. The Second Step's "sanity" signifies the openness that makes possible "an optimal relationship between what one truly is and everything that is," an openness to both the inner and the outer dimensions of spirituality. The "Power greater than ourselves" need not be personalized: the point of this Step is the simple acknowledgment that one's self is not God, not the center of the universe, not "everything that is." Psychiatrists studying the Twelve Steps have found here a check on narcissism.⁴ Step Two attests that even if the First Step seemed an act of despair, its very desperation contains the seed of hope.

The admission of failure plus the perception of hope opens the door to "surrender," although that classic term is eschewed in the A.A. texts.⁵ "Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him*," reads the Third Step; the italicized phrase is a late addition insisted on by the more secular (in their own terms, the more agnostically-inclined) among A.A.'s earliest members. The literature on this Step portrays the alcoholic as "an extreme example of self-will run riot," insisting that "selfishness — self-centeredness . . . is the root of our troubles." Members of Alcoholics Anonymous caution each other against demanding to be "in the driver's seat." The attempt to control — their own feelings, other people — is what gets alcoholics into trouble. Wariness of claims to control, then, hallmarks sobriety, which A.A. members understand as far more than the mere dryness of "putting the cork in the bottle." As a true practice, A.A.'s "sobriety" consists in **living** the Twelve Steps. Such sobriety is a synonym for spirituality, even for what others term sanctity.

The next six Steps may conveniently be examined as three pairs. These concern self-knowledge, dealing with one's failings, and making restitution for harm done. "4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves. 5. Admitted to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs." Some form of the word *honesty* appears three times in the brief paragraph that opens the "How It Works" chapter of the book, *Alcoholics*

Anonymous. Although the modern term *denial* does not appear in A.A. literature, cautions against “self-deception” and “self-delusion” are frequent. A.A.’s inventory reflects the traditional practice of the *examen*, but the word ‘inventory’ emphasizes survey of the positive as well as the negative, assets as well as liabilities. The **admission**, in addition to its quiet reminder of Step One, captures some of the values of the practices of confession and reconciliation. “This feeling of being at one with God and man, this emerging from isolation,” is how Wilson described them in concluding his explication of Step Five.⁶

Some see in Steps Six and Seven the very heart of the Twelve-Step program. “6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character. 7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.” Both Steps conspicuously divert attention from any particular disability (such as alcoholic drinking) to the living of life. More deeply, both strengthen awareness of the individual’s inability to exert control, thus reinforcing the surrender of all claims to be “in the driver’s seat.” In this spirituality, one seeks less to change oneself than to be open to being changed. Steps Six and Seven direct attention to one’s own role in the difficulties one experiences, without imposing with that recognition the kind of obligation that wilts resolve. Being “entirely ready” and “humbly asking,” however, are not quietist abdications, as anyone who tries to practice these Steps will discover.

“8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all. 9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.” The practice of making amends has a second and less obvious meaning. Face-to-face candor fosters the honesty that is so central to sobriety. Steps Eight and Nine carry the Fourth and Fifth Steps deeper. Here, in a less protected setting, honesty with others invites even greater honesty with oneself. Also, in a deepening of the “inventory” image of those earlier Steps, the insistence on amends conveys the classic spiritual vision of an ordered universe.

There exists a “right order,” and one who has disturbed it by wrongdoing has the responsibility to set it right.

Members of Alcoholics Anonymous sometimes refer to the final three of the Twelve Steps as “the maintenance Steps.” Step Ten sets that tone by recapitulating Steps Four through Nine: “Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.” Twelve-Step spirituality is not a once-and-for-all spirituality. Again there comes the reminder that one does not attain sobriety/spirituality in solitary isolation: to “admit” something requires another to admit it to. Those who seek sobriety need others, and those who associate with persons seeking sobriety will discover that they are needed.

Step Eleven opens other classic themes: “Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God *as we understood Him*, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.” The traditional disciplines of “prayer and meditation” are presented as means “to improve.” As the A.A. “Big Book” says, “We claim spiritual progress rather than spiritual perfection.”⁷ For those who live the Twelve Steps, “progress” is like Alasdair MacIntyre’s conception of a practice, something midway between the pure perfection of being saved and the pure pragmatism of not-drinking.⁸ The use of the word *improve* assumes a “contact” already present; the specification “conscious” is also important. Both are noted when members discuss this Step. Finally, consistent with the recognition that spirituality involves mystery and miracle rather than magic, the purpose of prayer is presented not as an attempt to control God, but as an expression of deference to divine reality.

Almost as well-known as A.A.’s First Step is its Twelfth: “Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.” The Step has three noteworthy parts. First, as with Step Eleven’s “conscious contact,” “a spiritual awakening” is not promised or encouraged but assumed, and it occurs “as the result of these steps.” The word *awakening* was

preferred to *experience* because the latter seemed “too religious,” but early confusions led to the addition of an Appendix on “Spiritual Experience” in the second (March 1941) printing of the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*. Presenting spiritual awakening or experience as “the personality change sufficient to bring about recovery from alcoholism,” the Appendix notes that it “has manifested itself among us in many different forms,” but most often in “what the psychologist William James calls the ‘educational variety’ because they develop slowly over a period of time.”⁹

The second part emphasizes “carrying this message”; note the specification of *this* message and the restriction of its constituency “to alcoholics.” Derivative programs have had to vary this last phrase, but it is essential to Twelve-Step spirituality that the target be limited. To aim — implicitly or explicitly — at the whole human race is to miss the point and therefore the meaning of the Steps themselves. Accepting limitation is as essential to the spirituality of the program as it is to that of the individual, as A.A.’s Fifth and Tenth Traditions remind.¹⁰

Last comes the phrase Bill Wilson intended to use as the title of his book on A.A. spirituality, a work begun but never completed: “To practice these principles in all our affairs.”¹¹ Note that as with “carrying this message,” “practicing these principles” is something that “we *tried to*” do. A.A. wisdom recognizes a successful Twelfth-Step call to be one on which the caller does not drink: someone “powerless over alcohol” does not define success in terms of any ability to control another’s drinking. Finally, as if to underline what became clear in Steps 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 10, there is the reminder that spirituality cannot be partial. By its nature, what is spiritual cannot be partly so, and thus its practice must be “in *all* our affairs.” Nor is this only a traditional understanding as VanNess’s “Introduction” to this volume makes clear. Such embracing inclusivity — this sense of necessarily dealing with *wholes* — characterizes all expressions of spirituality, religious or secular.

The ideas and practices contained in these Twelve Steps are not new. The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous represent — re-

present, make present again — insights embedded in the classic spiritual traditions of the “Peoples of the Book.” Those richer traditions do contain far more: as Wilson loved to remind, “A.A. is but a kindergarten of the spirit.” A.A.’s earliest members rediscovered that thread of the ancient wisdom that has been called “The Spirituality of Imperfection.”¹² In introducing the story of how they accomplished this rediscovery, and of the significance of their achievement, two facets of the first presentation of the Twelve Steps merit brief attention.

The book *Alcoholics Anonymous* presents the Twelve Steps in a chapter titled, “How It Works.” That “how” is descriptive rather than analytic. What the chapter and the Steps promise, and deliver, is not the kind of technical explanation that allows for precise manipulation and controlled studies, but a simple description of how A.A.’s earliest members, obsessive-compulsive drinkers all, had been able to live constructively and even happily without drinking alcohol. Secondly, the Steps do tell *how* rather than “why.” They do not explore causality. Instead, Twelve-Step spirituality brings a phenomenological approach to reflection on experience. It achieves this not least by remaining descriptive — for example, by encouraging the inventorying of self rather than the blaming of others. The vocabulary of the Steps attends to *one’s own* “unmanageability,” insanity, wrongs, shortcomings, defects of character. It lists the persons that *I* have harmed, not those who may have harmed me. Close by the Twelve Steps in the A.A. Big Book comes the reminder: “Resentment is the ‘number one’ offender. It destroys more alcoholics than anything else.”¹³ Twelve-Step spirituality does not perceive alcoholics as victims. Description, not ascription, is the task of the Steps.

The Story of the Twelve Steps

The Twelve Steps were formulated by Alcoholics Anonymous, which came into existence between 1935 and 1939. Although the early members of Alcoholics Anonymous developed these Steps

from their own experience, broader forces shaped their interpretation of that experience. The story of that shaping is the story of the Twelve-Step program, the story of a spirituality conveyed precisely by the telling of stories. In telling their own story, the early members of Alcoholics Anonymous presented its program as deriving from “medicine, religion, and our own experience.” Proximately, A.A. came into being out of what was at the time termed “The Oxford Group.” That group’s animus as well as its vision of itself seems best conveyed by both its first and its later names: the “The First Century Christian Fellowship” and “Moral Re-Armament.”¹⁴

A.A.’s connection with the Oxford Group began when, sometime in 1931, Dr. Carl Jung told an alcoholic American that his only hope of cure lay in finding “a religious experience.” Jung’s patient, a businessman who never affiliated with Alcoholics Anonymous, joined the Oxford Group and eventually carried its (and Jung’s) message to an alcoholic friend who in turn brought that message in late 1934 to his former drinking buddy, William Griffith Wilson.¹⁵

Wilson resisted the religious elements in his friend Ebby’s news. Some weeks later, though, during his fourth hospitalized detoxification, Bill experienced the kind of spiritual awakening classically described by William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, a book that the Oxford Group encouraged Wilson and those who followed him to read. In that book and in his physician’s confirmation of the change Bill sensed in himself, he found both validation of his recent experience and a theologically-styled understanding of the “deflation at depth” that well described the experience of the middle-class alcoholic of that era.

At both Towns Hospital where he had been detoxified, and at a mission run by Calvary Episcopal Church, then the virtual headquarters of the Oxford Group, Wilson’s early efforts to share his discovery proved fruitless. Then in May 1935, on a business trip to Akron, Ohio, Wilson found himself again obsessed with the desire to drink alcohol, a craving he had not experienced over the preceding five months. Reaching an Oxford Group member via the hotel

church directory, Bill was invited to meet an alcoholic surgeon, Dr. Robert Holbrook Smith. When they met the next day, Wilson, somewhat awed at approaching “a man of science,” told Smith not of his spiritual “hot flash” nor his understanding of alcoholism as some kind of malady, but of his own experience of drinking and trying to not drink and especially of his own need, now, to talk to another alcoholic so that he would not drink this day.

Dr. Bob, who had been attending the Oxford Group for over two years as “a student of the spiritual” but who had nevertheless continued his alcoholic imbibing, heard in Bill’s story both understanding and hope. Some weeks later, traveling to a medical convention in Atlantic City, Smith went on one last binge. Then on June 10, 1935, Dr. Bob Smith had his last drink — a bottle of beer given him by Wilson to steady his hand sufficiently to allow him to perform surgery. Members of Alcoholics Anonymous regard that date on which their second co-founder achieved sobriety as the birthday of their fellowship, the first Twelve-Step program.

“The alcoholic squadron” grew slowly within the Oxford Group until 1937 when the New York contingent left those auspices as too demanding, “too religious.” In Akron, the connection lasted until 1939: separation occurred partly because of the discomfort of some Catholic alcoholics who deemed the Oxford Group “too Protestant.” During this time, members spoke of their “word-of-mouth, twenty-four hour program.” The Oxford Group used much popular religious literature, but none of it offered special instructions for alcoholics. By early 1938 many of the alcoholics felt the need to set down in writing what they had learned, and the decision was made to produce a book. In the course of drafting that book, eventually titled *Alcoholics Anonymous*, Bill Wilson one afternoon, in an “anything but spiritual mood,” set out to scratch down “what we called ‘the word-of-mouth program.’” Though subject to considerable variation, it all boiled down into a pretty consistent procedure”¹⁶

Outlining that procedure, Wilson felt “that the program was still not definite enough.” Seeking to be “more explicit,” to leave “not a

single loophole through which the rationalizing alcoholic could wriggle out,” he decided that “our six chunks of truth should be broken up into smaller pieces . . . the better to get the distant reader over the barrel, and at the same time . . . to broaden and deepen the spiritual implications of our whole presentation.” After scribbling for “perhaps half an hour,” Bill paused at what seemed a stopping point to number the new steps. “They added up to twelve. Somehow this number seemed significant. Without any special rhyme or reason I connected them with the twelve apostles.” Except for a few very minor changes, these are the Twelve Steps that come down to us.¹⁷

“Spiritual rather than religious”

The changes made to Wilson’s first draft — replacing the word “God” in Step Two with “Power greater than ourselves,” the addition of “*as we understood Him*” after the word “God” in Steps Three and Eleven, and the deletion of the phrase “on our knees” in Step Six — were forced by those members who found the original version “too religious.” The early members of Alcoholics Anonymous liked to present “medicine and religion” as the source of their insights, claiming William James and Carl Jung as quasi-founders of their program, but the most important contribution to Alcoholics Anonymous of both Carl Jung and William James, as well as of the Oxford Group, was their openness to unconventional spirituality. This is expressed within not only Alcoholics Anonymous but virtually all other Twelve-Step groups in their presentation of their program as “spiritual rather than religious.”¹⁸

The claim of A.A. (and derivative programs) to be “spiritual rather than religious” convinces few at first hearing. It is, after all, hardly original: most new religions begin by denying that they are new and/ or that they are religions. Twelve-Step programs, however, do come by the claim honestly, for they share the main motivation behind the assertion – the attempt to appeal to those alienated by what they think of as “religion.” Most of the earliest

targets – and members — of Alcoholics Anonymous had been raised in conventional religion but had abandoned its practice during their drinking years. Feeling condemned by practitioners of religion, they avoided religious settings. Still, many, their sober stories revealed, experienced a kind of shame over not being good enough for those realities. For many, but not all, such individuals, A.A.’s “kindergarten of the spirit” led to recommitment to formal religion.¹⁹

Later candidates for Twelve-Step programs brought different experiences and attitudes. Most came less versed in conventional religion but more alienated from it. For many of these, “spiritual rather than religious” served as a shibboleth permitting initial investigation. Also, for a time in 1970s and 1980s, the term ‘spirituality’ bore a positive connotation among especially those young people whose experimentation with chemical use led them to Twelve-Step settings.²⁰ There is another facet to the claim, “spiritual rather than religious.” Spoken by an individual, it can signal a choice of the private that rejects the communal. One can seek spirituality by oneself, but religion is never a merely personal affair. As the word suggests, religion binds people to other people. At least one aspect of spiritual life can be found in solitude.²¹

This tendency was balanced within Alcoholics Anonymous itself by locating “the root of our troubles” in “self-centeredness” and discovering the importance of “fellowship” to its program. Some have reproached Twelve-Step groups for focusing attention inward. The criticism has validity, although it tends to ignore the very real distinction between “self-help” and “mutual-aid” — a difference as important as that between professional assistance and self-help. Genuine Twelve-Step groups are “self-help” in the sense that professionals as professionals have no role in them. On the other hand, emphasis on unmanageability, admitting fault, making amends, and relying on a “Power greater than ourselves” creates a setting of “mutual aid” rather than one of bootstrapping “self-help.” The invitation is to outreach and connection.²²

How do adherents to Twelve-Step programs understand “spiritual rather than religious”? Twelve-Step programs do offer a vision

classically termed “religious.” But expressions of religion historically seem to involve: (1) doctrines, which require belief; (2) rules, which command or prohibit actions; (3) and an institutional authority, which formulates the doctrines and enforces the rules; (4) worship and ritual, which express reverence for the professed source of all of the above, are also characteristic of religion.

Twelve-Step programs require none of these. Must members believe in God? Fifty plus years of A.A. experience suggests that the only belief necessary to sobriety is that one’s self is not God, an admission that members who term themselves atheist or agnostic readily make. The only rule likely to be heard around Alcoholics Anonymous runs, “Don’t drink and go to meetings” – far from imposing commandments for anyone inclined to claim membership. Authority? “Great suffering and great love are A.A.’s disciplinarians; we need no others. . . . We simply leave it to John Barleycorn.” Groups do develop routines, in which outsiders may discern something similar to ritual, but one finds no semblance of worship.²³

The concept of worship raises another point. Many associations, and not least religious societies, reveal a tendency to fall into a kind of self-worship – a conviction that “we” are somehow better than all the heathen “they”s. For members of Alcoholics Anonymous, the culture still sufficiently stigmatizes alcoholics so that anonymity continues to serve the purposes that begot its practice. Early A.A. members cherished anonymity because it protected them, attracted new recruits, and guarded the fellowship against the vagaries of some members. They soon discovered an even more important value, recognizing anonymity as a “spiritual tenstrike” because it restrained tendencies to grandiosity. Programs and groups that do not take anonymity seriously, that claim to be “Twelve-Step” without also being “Twelve-Tradition,” thus lose what the Twelfth Tradition calls “the spiritual foundation.” One benefit of the backlash against Twelve-Step programs may be a revival of that awareness.²⁴

Spiritual rather than Material: The Experience of Addiction

More important than the “spiritual rather than religious” contrast proclaimed by Twelve-Step rhetoric is the spiritual-as-other-than-material distinction lived out in Twelve-Step practice. That the first Twelve-Step program was Alcoholics Anonymous is no accident. The tradition out of which the Twelve Steps grew saw the greatest threat to “the spiritual” not in “the material,” but in the tendency to confuse the material with the spiritual — a confusion reified in the inability to recognize **enough**, the precise condition that renders alcoholism such an apt metaphor for that confusion.

Dr. Carl Jung’s presentation of alcoholism as an instance of *spiritus contra spiritum* — spirits warring against the spiritual — aptly captured that sense.²⁵ This vision posits the distinction between the spiritual and the material as fundamental: the very word ‘spiritual’ onomatopoeically conveys that it is other-than-material. Like breath or breeze, the spiritual is experienced in its effects but not directly seen. It can never be owned, bought, or sold. This distinction, though, implies no condemnation of the material. The incarnational insight of mainline western spirituality recognizes material reality as a vehicle for the spiritual — as reality to be rejoiced in, but also to be respected — for it bears a potential for danger not least because of the power of its connection with the spiritual.

The attitude to beverage alcohol held by most members of Alcoholics Anonymous, especially in the context of A.A.’s 1930s origins, affords a useful illustration. Locating alcoholism in the alcoholic rather than in the alcohol, in the human being rather than in the bottle, displeased Prohibitionists even as it mollified the alcoholic beverage industry, but neither was the intention of early A.A. members. They were rather reflecting the classic spiritual insight that “sin” resided not in creation but in what people did with it. Some members even describe their alcoholism as a kind of *felix culpa*, expressing gratitude even for being alcoholic, because, as

they see it, only the depths of their alcoholism made it possible for them to find the heights of serene sobriety.

Materialism has another facet, as the ongoing story of Twelve-Step programs attests: there lurks always the danger of another kind of confusion of the spiritual with the material, the peril that an expression of spirituality will itself become commodity – an item of commerce, a vehicle for greed. Early Alcoholics Anonymous was not immune to this tendency. Wilson located the beginning of the fellowship’s “group conscience” in members’ opposition to what they saw as the danger of his “selling the program” if he accepted a proffered employment opportunity in the hospital where he had been detoxified. Among many such pulls towards entrepreneurial endeavors, A.A.’s early experience hammered out what became its traditions of singleness of purpose, non-involvement in outside enterprises, and self-support. By establishing these traditions A.A. avoided the trap of becoming itself a commodity.²⁶

But among some groups too glibly labelled “Twelve-Step,” programs that ignore the Twelve Traditions, matters developed differently. Often shaped by professional therapies for addictions ever more broadly conceived, these in time formed what came to be called the “Recovery Movement.” Although that term may include programs that remain true to Twelve-Step insight, most movement groups, as the term suggests, show little respect for or even awareness of the Twelve Traditions. The story of how Twelve-Step programs gave rise to such groups affords a modern example of how a secular spirituality, like a religious spirituality, can cease to be spiritual when it becomes a commodity.

The Commodification of the Twelve Steps

Because of A.A.’s centrality in the story of Twelve-Step programs, the process by which recovery programs became commodities is best seen within the history of Alcoholics Anonymous. That development may be outlined in three phases: 1935-1955, 1956-1976, 1977-present. From the time of A.A.’s conception in 1935

through its self-proclaimed “Coming of Age” in 1955, members sought cultural acceptance, pursuing this goal as a way of reaching more alcoholics. Paths tried but not taken included affiliating with the National Council for Education on Alcoholism and sacrificing anonymity for the sake of promotion. In both cases, grass-roots member reactions shaped what by 1950 became the Traditions of nonaffiliation with outside enterprises and anonymity as a “spiritual foundation.” Most A.A. members found acceptance best attained by emphasizing their program’s respectful connections with medicine and religion, professions at the time viewed as altruistic.

Largely because it carefully eschewed being mistaken for either therapy or theology, Alcoholics Anonymous not only attained the cooperation of medical and religious professionals but avoided being co-opted by either group. It achieved this by (largely implicitly) playing the one off against the other. Echoes of a science vs. religion debate still resonated in the 1940s, and while that led some in each camp — medicine and religion — to write off Alcoholics Anonymous as belonging to the opposition, it enabled A.A. itself to fend off a too smothering an embrace by either group. Members remained aware of their debts to both.

1955 marks a turning point because not only did A.A. itself celebrate its “Coming of Age,” but that twentieth anniversary gathering was honored by a message from U.S. President Dwight Eisenhower, who echoed the praise accorded Alcoholics Anonymous by the American Public Health Association, which had earlier bestowed upon A.A. its Lasker Award.

During its second twenty years, from 1956 to 1976, Alcoholics Anonymous developed organizational stability, smoothly handling what could have been a major hazard to continuity — the death in 1971 of longer-lived co-founder Bill Wilson. This period also witnessed a shift from the organization being merely accepted to being positively valued. In a world that sought the personal salvation of peace of mind from advice columnists and religious popularizers, endorsement by such luminaries brought considerable prominence. Alcoholics Anonymous passed the test. The high point

of Twelve-Step program respectability likely occurred in 1976-1977, when Presidential spouse Betty Ford and actors Jason Robards and Mary Tyler Moore — though carefully saying nothing about A.A. affiliation — spoke openly of their alcoholism in a vocabulary that listeners understood reflected the Twelve-Step way of life.²⁷

The period after 1977 brought the developments that require distinguishing between those programs and groups that focus on living the Twelve Steps, and programs and groups that, though they may have adopted some Twelve-Step elements, actually oriented their practice elsewhere. One reason for the respect accorded A.A. by the professions of medicine and religion was the fellowship's acceptance of its own limitations. Claiming to be neither medicine nor religion, A.A. threatened neither. But the acceptance of its own limitations as a fellowship — an acceptance that aptly paralleled the individual alcoholic's acceptance of the limitation implicit in the admission, "I am an alcoholic," — bore ambiguous fruit. On the one hand, it was the reason why other Twelve-Step groups formed: Alcoholics Anonymous members claimed no competence in anything other than their own alcoholism. On the other hand, this awareness, to which so many other groups owed their inspiration, did not always attract their imitation.

As the example of A.A.'s first offspring, Al-Anon (a Twelve-Step program for spouses and others who love an alcoholic) attested as early as the 1950s, the Twelve-Step way of life could be helpfully applied to difficulties other than alcoholism. In that decade and the next, groups of people stigmatized for other obsessive-compulsive behaviors, notably gamblers and over-eaters, quietly adopted and adapted for their own conditions the Twelve Steps — and the Twelve Traditions — set forth by Alcoholics Anonymous. Each group applied the program to its own particular disability, recognizing that though the Twelve Steps make available a way of life livable by all, entry into that way of life comes only through the doorway of a specifically experienced powerlessness. In the 1970s, two complicatedly related changes occurred, changes that eventually affected not only A.A.'s offspring and imitators, but also the way

people understood the term *Twelve-Step program*. The two changes concerned the notions of alcoholism-as-disability and alcohol-as-drug.

Under the umbrella afforded by civil rights legislation, the “Hughes Act” of 1970 and additional laws passed in 1973 and 1978 sought to aid alcoholics by moving public policy, if not attitudes, toward understanding alcoholism as a disability meriting the same consideration as others. These acts broadened and in some cases mandated opportunities for treatment, and a new industry soon sprang into being. Early A.A. had made use of “drying out” facilities. Following Dr. Bob Smith’s example, members from the beginning sought hospital admission for the medical detoxification of those who needed such care. Over time, halfway houses emerged for the more severely impaired, and a few treatment settings developed — usually carefully nonmedical — staffed and supported by members of Alcoholics Anonymous who undertook these efforts largely for the sake of their own sobriety, as a part of their Twelfth-Step work.

When the new laws broadened funding for treatment, a slow evolution in practice became a mad race for money. What had been largely a labor of love — and in some settings remained so — became in others mainly a way of making money, as wider cultural awareness and legislatively mandated insurance coverage combined to create a fruit ripe for plucking. Critics pointed out that the consistent bane of spirituality, greed, seemed to guide many who now clothed their projects in Twelve-Step language. A.A. applied the pragmatic phrase “whatever works” to staying away from the first drink. Some of the new treatment providers applied the maxim to developing new “products” and manipulating diagnoses. Before long, some who worked in treatment found themselves queried more often about “the bottom line” than about “quality sobriety.” Many of the most effective, those most experienced in spiritual service, moved to other settings or even other fields. Before long also, some funders of care — governments, companies, insurers — began to suspect that they were being defrauded. Reacting against the abuses,

some began to view all recovery programs as rip-offs, rejecting anything that smacked of the Twelve-Step programs with which they associated this experience.²⁸

The second significant 1970s occurrence was the recrudescence of American twentieth-century “reefer madness” — the discovery of apparently rampant use of psychoactive chemicals, or in the common shorthand, “drugs.” Medical historian David Musto has termed addiction “The American Disease.” When drugs are mentioned, few think of ethyl alcohol, but, using the concept of “chemical dependency,” many in the treatment industry labored to change that understanding to meet the reality that public opinion (and funding sources) showed more concern over drug addiction than over alcohol abuse. Recognition of the relationship between the two had been present in Alcoholics Anonymous since at least 1944, when an alcoholic physician, interned in the federal facility at Lexington, Kentucky, wrote to *The Grapevine* proposing a “Hopheads Corner” within Alcoholics Anonymous, for members also addicted to “other chemicals.” This understanding served well for over three decades. Narcotics Anonymous was begun, in Lexington, by A.A. members reaching out to their fellow drug addicts who were not alcoholics.²⁹

The exigencies of treatment — and the realities of funding — changed perceptions as well as practices. Recognizing that treatment did not cure addiction, for what “cure” took place occurred in the ongoing practice that was recovery, some treatment providers began encouraging their ever broader population of clients to attend A.A. meetings, even if they were not alcoholics. Another new and different population arrived as judges increasingly began to sentence drunk driving offenders to attendance at Alcoholics Anonymous meetings.

Individual groups in A.A.’s decentralized fellowship reacted variously. Some agreed, some refused, to sign (preferably initial) court attendance slips. Some began meetings with the request that those who had no desire to stop drinking leave or remain silent, and/or that those who had problems other than alcohol speak only of

their alcohol-related difficulties in this setting. Others held closed (for admitted alcoholics only) and open (to anyone interested) meetings in different rooms in the same building, referring newcomers to the latter. Still other groups divided, some members leaving to found a new group either more public or more private than the setting that had provoked their departure. A.A.'s General Service Office, drawing on the experience of the groups, developed "Guidelines" for "Cooperating with Court, A.S.A.P. and Similar Programs"; most legal authorities were happy to work within them.³⁰ Although similar guidelines were suggested for treatment settings, cooperation proved more difficult in this more complex area. Some professionals who worked with alcoholics and addicts had entered the rapidly expanding field hastily and lacked real knowledge of Twelve-Step programs. Sometimes they made inappropriate referrals. To meet that problem, which increased as the multiplication of addictions and treatments swelled the number of Recovery Movement candidates, other professionals, as well as the victims themselves, formed new groups.

Many of these groups, especially those concerned with what came to be called "process addictions," tried to cling to the Twelve-Step style, but their actual practice often moved away from Twelve-Step insight. Cut off from the Twelve Traditions, some programs adopted professional ideology, rejecting the telling of stories of "experience, strength, and hope" for the satisfactions of analyzing the past in the categories of therapy. Others seemed to foster visions of self-as-victim, attracting criticism that added tar to the already forming backlash against anything that smacked of "Twelve-Step." As more than one observer noted, some of the new groups offered less a Twelve-Step program than a ready-made market for pushers of "recovery" paraphernalia.³¹

By the 1990s, the situation seemed hopelessly confused. On the one hand, the term "Twelve-Step" came laden with connotations of self-pity, narcissism, and greed. On the other hand, many continued to find in various Twelve-Step programs vehicles for a spirituality that even outsiders recognized as real. "If you have decided you

want what we have,” runs A.A.’s introduction to the Twelve Steps. One description of spirituality suggests that it is that which, when I see it in another, I want some of it, and if I get it, my participation in it enhances rather than diminishes that other’s own participation and joy in it. Another description, noting the frequent use of the words ‘insight’ and ‘vision’ in speaking of spirituality, suggests that it involves not so much seeing different things as seeing things differently – the ability to recognize in reality more than that which can be owned or coveted.

Both descriptions well fit A.A.’s understanding of sobriety, the Twelve-Step mark of spiritual well-being. Such a reality will always be a mystery, a paradox, and not least because it comes in different forms. The very variety of Twelve-Step programs and their members, no less than the variety of saints revered by tradition, reminds that there is no one way to be spiritual. This is perhaps the key insight mediated by the actual experience of the first Twelve-Step program, Alcoholics Anonymous.

Twelve-Step Spirituality

Variety and paradox: Twelve-Step programs came into being in Akron, Ohio, when a visiting New York hustler sought out a local alcoholic physician. Although Akron remained a hub of A.A. activity, New York soon became the new fellowship’s main center. Differences between Akron and New York A.A. appeared early on, as opinions varied about the word ‘God’ in the Steps and the use of the Oxford Group “Four Absolutes.” The differing emphases were passed on as the young fellowship spread, but they remained largely latent until later decades brought the wider mobility of a more numerous membership and the gaudier borrowings of the Twelve-Step mantle. The chief difference, from the beginning, as the examples suggest, concerned how members understood “the spiritual.”

Although some observers interpreted this divergence in terms of the stereotypes of urban sophistication vs. heartland wholesomeness,

members in both regions reflected each view. The distinction was more accurately between those perhaps best termed the “transcendentally inclined,” who viewed the spiritual as somehow *other* and whose vocabulary tended to echo that of traditional theology, and the “immanentists,” for whom the spiritual pervades all reality, and whose vocabulary, although less common in the 1940s and 1950s, fits far better both ancient mystical traditions and recent cultural fashions.³²

For the first forty years of the history of Twelve-Step programs, both these approaches were evident, each respectful of the other. That balancing of the two visions, which was an important factor in shaping the Twelve-Step insight, can be studied in Bill Wilson’s *A.A. Grapevine* articles. Whether because of Wilson’s loss or, more likely, because of the impact of what have been termed the “Culture Wars,” mutual respect and balancing compromise between the transcendent and immanent spiritual approaches, as well as between therapeutic and spiritual emphases, began in the late 1970s to give way to increasing polarization among programs claiming the Twelve-Step mantle. These divisions, though, ignore the essence of Twelve-Step spirituality, which involves finding a way of living with incongruity, a way to embrace paradox.³³

The Paradox of Twelve-Step Spirituality

The story of Twelve-Step programs suggests that a spirituality, to be recognized as genuine in a secular age, must enable the bridging of difference, the embrace of paradox. Twelve-Step spirituality began with the then-revolutionary discovery that “sober” and “alcoholic” could be both/and rather than either-or. Similarly, so long as they bridged medicine and religion without claiming to be either, so long as they mediated both transcendent and immanent spiritual understandings, Twelve-Step programs helped participants to attain some kind of spirituality and were acknowledged as effective even by many who did not participate in them.

When some imitators deviated from that Twelve-Step insight to become either a form of therapy or a mode of New Age religion, they lost respect not least because they lost effectiveness. There is nothing wrong – indeed, there is much right – with both therapy and religion accurately labeled, but it abuses both to present either as the other, or to recognize insufficiently their distinction from one another. The Twelve Traditions protect the Twelve Steps from such confusion of spirituality or religion with therapy. They do this by implanting an acceptance of limitation, which encourages respect for difference. These complementary attitudes clear a space within which the realities of paradox may be lived. Programs that ignore the Traditions tend to reject paradox; most seem also to slip away from first the vocabulary, and then the practice, of the Twelve Steps.

Twelve-Step spirituality began not only in the admission of “powerlessness” and “unmanageability” but in the acceptance and embrace of the paradoxical identity “sober alcoholic.” In finding in *paradox* a key to spirituality, Twelve-Step programs reclaimed a tradition perhaps too glibly dismissed in an era intolerant of mystery and mistrustful of anything that cannot be explained and controlled. Twelve-Step programs offer an arena for, and a way of, living with the paradoxes embodied in one’s own life. To be a “sober alcoholic” — a term originally shocking that has become overfamiliar and even banal — is to accept that one lives not only with but *in* paradox.

Twelve-Step programs offer a spirituality of paradox. The stories told at meetings evidence that and how these programs inculcate experiences of release, gratitude, humility, tolerance, and forgiveness. Each involves paradox. Release’s freedom comes only to those who “let go.” The vision that is gratitude – the recognition of how generously one has received – is given only to those who give of themselves. Humility accepts that living humanely, like being a “sober alcoholic,” involves accepting the reality of being both/and rather than claiming or demanding to be either-or. Tolerance of others’ weaknesses flows from confronting one’s own flaws. The ability to forgive comes only out of the experience of

being forgiven. These experiences, paradoxes all, hallmark and even constitute Twelve-Step spirituality.

Living in paradox involves accepting the tragic as well as the joyous. “The chiefest sanctity of a temple is that it is a place to which people go to weep in common,” Unamuno wrote. Twelve-Step programs provide such temples. An age that views all suffering as merely evil and a culture frustrated by ambiguity and dominated by a technology intolerant of paradox find such temples threatening, as some criticisms of Twelve-Step groups make clear. Yet weeping is not moaning – a distinction sometimes ignored. In theological terms, what the critics protest is the seeming promise of “cheap grace” or, in a more secular vocabulary, “soft science”: the point is the same. Just as bought love ceases to be love, so too do spirituality that can be sold and science that can be merchandised lose their unique natures. Those who glibly explain mystery and who confuse miracle with magic merit challenge. Such tendencies lurk in all, and perhaps especially in those who are spiritual. Twelve-Step experience suggests that only those who recognize that they themselves have *both* wept in tragedy *and* moaned in self-pity have standing to point out that difference to others.³⁴

Twelve-Step Spirituality as Metaphor

A spirituality that embraces paradox will be sensitive to metaphor. Twelve-Step programs have significantly influenced the metaphors in which twentieth-century people understand deviant behaviors. Examining these metaphors thus illumines both the rise and the apparent decline of Twelve-Step programs as vehicles of spirituality. The medicalization of deviance marks a main characteristic of advancing modernity: those who act contrary to social norms come to be thought of as “sick” rather than as “sinners.” Twelve-Step programs played a two-phased role in this development, not only advancing that change but advancing beyond it.

First, although it is not true that Alcoholics Anonymous teaches that alcoholism is a disease, for such teaching would violate A.A.’s

Tradition on “outside issues,” their experience led many A.A. members, and others, to move from the moral toward a medical model of alcoholism and other addictions. Secondly, however, in its presentation of the alcoholic as suffering from physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual disability – and especially in its emphasis on spiritual issues – the Twelve-Step approach broadened the medical model in a holistic direction.

Groups untrammelled by A.A.’s Twelve Traditions even more avidly promoted medical explanations of their deviant behaviors. In doing so, some abandoned holistic understanding for legal advantage. How we speak shapes how we think, and so the shift from the language of common experience to the vocabulary of professional therapy had larger ramifications. The Twelve Steps made available in modern terms an ancient spiritual tradition — the core Greco-Judaeo-Christian insights that shaped Western civilization. A.A.’s early imitators — Al-Anon, Gamblers Anonymous – hewed close to that tradition, adapting it as necessary, but retaining such insights of the classic spirituality as the centrality of the danger of pride, the embrace of imperfection and a delight in paradox.

The shift from the Twelve Steps to therapy can be seen as early as Charles Dederick’s founding of Synanon in 1958. Synanon and other programs for users of illegal drugs usually presented themselves honestly, as something other than Twelve-Step programs. They claimed to go beyond the Twelve-Step approach; Dederick, for example, opined that comparing A.A. to Synanon was like comparing a rowboat to an airplane.³⁵ Some of these non-Twelve-Step programs hew closer to Twelve-Step practice than do some newer phenomena that present themselves as Twelve-Step programs. Many (but not all) “adult children” and “codependency” associations, for example, run directly contrary to Twelve-Step insight. The reliance on a literature produced by quasi-professionals has led to preferring the vocabulary of therapy to the language of spirituality and to analyzing the past in ways more redolent of 1930s psychotherapies than of any recognizable tradition of spirituality.

Twelve-Step programs are, of course, not the only kind of spirituality — not even the only kind of recovery spirituality. Openness to paradox does not mean that Twelve-Step spirituality lacks a distinctive character. A.A. literature delineates a spirituality conveyed by the telling of stories of “experience, strength and hope” — stories that “disclose in a general way what we used to be like, what happened, and what we are like now.” It is on this basis that the Twelve Steps are presented, as the very next sentence of “How It Works” invites: “If you have decided you want what we have and are willing to go to any length to get it — then you are ready to take certain steps.” Groups that center their practice on “sharing what things are like and how we feel about that” do not offer the same program. They may provide great therapeutic benefits and even valid spiritual consolation, but the change from “we” to “things” and the shift from deciding and willing to feeling: these are not unsubstantial variations.

Individualism and Community

Two final topics deepen insight into the workings of Twelve-Step programs and aid in distinguishing Twelve-Step spirituality from ersatz imitators. Twelve-Step programs both subvert and foster *individualism*. The resulting ambiguous relationship to *community* is resolved by the way members understand their participation in these programs.

The Great Depression of the 1930s marked the nadir of the deepest American faith — confidence in individual autonomy, in the power of each individual to be “the master of my fate, the captain of my soul.” The decade that gave rise to industrial unionism understood that acknowledging a need for others need not signal weakness or aberration.

The “we”-ness of the admission of individual powerlessness, the insistence on needing others implicit in the Fifth, Ninth, Tenth, and Twelfth Steps, the fellowship of the meetings that even the A.A. Big Book did not anticipate: these subverted the ideology of radical

individualism and the patterns of thinking that sustained it. Personal situations as well as social conditions attested that the old individualistic ideology was no longer tenable. A.A.'s revolutionary contribution was not medical diagnosis of the "disease" of alcoholism but its insistence that the most important reality in the life of any alcoholic, sobriety, could not be attained alone. One needed an-other, whether that "other" was understood as other people or as some kind of more remote Higher Power. If "the root of our troubles" is "self-centeredness," its uprooting begins with the acknowledgment that there *is* a "power greater than ourselves."

Yet such an understanding, even as it ostensibly subverts individualism, appeals to a specifically Protestant "Higher Power." Contact with that "Power greater" is unmediated: Alcoholics Anonymous is neither a church nor a people. A.A.'s Twelve-Step approach thus undermined individualism in a very individualistic way. An opening to community emerges in the Twelve Traditions, but the Traditions protect community very gingerly. The First Tradition recognizes its importance by reminding that "Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon A.A. unity." The Third Tradition enshrines A.A.'s powerlessness to restrict its own community by establishing that "The only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking" — an internal reality almost impossible to gainsay.

What about the larger community? Do Twelve-Step programs deflect people from responsibility, from working to change conditions that cause suffering? Twelve-Step insight does incline toward the strategy of improving reality outside self by first improving the reality of one's self, as opposed to an approach that seeks to improve self by changing outside reality. But in a way of life that embraces paradox, this is a matter of both/ and, not either-or. The Serenity Prayer, so cherished by A.A. members, asks: "Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." Criticisms along this line assume that basing affiliation on awareness of a shared flaw will discourage social action. Such an

assumption ignores history: many movements committed to changing the world have “founded their sense of internal community on an ideology of common sinfulness and weakness.”³⁶

“An ideology of common sinfulness and weakness” implies something more about the cohesion of community, offering another useful way of distinguishing Twelve-Step programs from imitators that have abandoned the vision of those Steps. What is the basis on which an individual takes part? Does one join this group and participate in its program because one needs to, or because one “wants to” do so? In the community created by and within Twelve-Step programs, one participates not because one wants to, but because one *needs to*. Early A.A. members, for example, saw the choices available to the actively drinking alcoholic to be “abstinence, insanity, or death,” and their experience suggested that at least some alcoholics were able to abstain only within the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous.

This distinction between the style of community created by Twelve-Step programs composed of those who *need to* belong, and the “self-help” mode of “sharing and caring” groups available for those who *want to* join them, returns us to the core of Twelve-Step spirituality, the sense of powerlessness. Alcoholics are not the only ones who “hit bottom,” and so here again we find not some clean-cut either-or but instead a slippery spectrum of both/and. Any group that styles itself “Twelve-Step” or “self-help” will likely contain some individuals who profess that they are there by choice, and others who attest that they are present out of necessity. It nevertheless remains true that the more closely any program adheres to A.A.’s original Steps and Traditions, the more numerous will be those who say they participate not because they want to, but because they have to.

Twelve-Step programs and their offspring rehearse in capsule form a common process in the history of spiritual insight. There may be no Second Law of Spiritual Thermodynamics that leads inevitably to the entropy of the Sheilaism described in Robert Bellah’s *Habits of the Heart*; but at least within the mainstream

tradition of which Twelve-Step programs are a part, it is a common phenomenon that the sense that one is being drawn to or compelled by some larger reality becomes for later generations the judgment that one chooses and decides for oneself.³⁷ Programs that remain true to the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions seem able to retain a traditional qualification of the individualism inherent in the tradition: awareness that one needs others for one's own very survival substantially limits any sense of absolute individual autonomy.

Final Reflections

Several themes recur in the story of Twelve-Step programs, inviting thought. One wonders, for example, whether it is preferable to be “sick” or to be a “sinner.” As R. D. Laing noted concerning the term *mental illness*, changing the name of a reality is less likely to change our understanding of that reality than it is to change our understanding of the name. An age acutely sensitive to pain has, ironically, multiplied stigmata.

Second, must the broadening of a spiritual insight lead inevitably to its loss? Oxford Group historian Walter Houston Clark thought that this eventually happened to the Oxford Group, suggesting that A.A.'s departure from that organization's auspices had allowed it to avoid a similar fate. The new program's insistent singleness of purpose in accepting the limitation of dealing only with alcoholics reflected awareness of the danger. As Bill Wilson later summed up: “Most of all, the Oxford Group taught us what *not* to do.”³⁸ Spiritualities always exist in some material context. In time, the core Twelve-Step insight of accepting limitation became attenuated not only in imitators but even within the A.A. fellowship itself, as the very decentralization that preserved it from professionalization became the avenue for its corruption by commodification. Many both within and outside of A.A. resist this trend, and so this part of the story continues, albeit differently in diverse Twelve-Step settings.

Finally, it is fitting in an age of language theory that the uses and misuses of metaphor — and specifically of addiction as metaphor — summarize the story of the spirituality of Twelve-Step programs. From A.A. members' recognition of their own experience in Carl Jung's portrayal of alcoholism as a warring of *spiritus contra spiritum*, to the vision that sees virtually every activity as some kind of addiction, there runs a tortuous but real trail.

Twelve-Step programs have to do with spirituality because they have to do with addiction. Only when it is recognized that addiction is *more than* metaphor can addiction *as* metaphor work. Because those who have experienced actual addiction know its reality, they can translate that metaphor. The traditional spirituality of the Western world, from which the insight of the Twelve-Step programs derives, recognized *materialism* — the fixation on quantity, on *more* — as the ultimate expression of the core sin of self-centeredness. Related to this sin is the claim to be oneself the center of the universe or God. Perhaps only a culture capable of questioning its own materialism can produce and sustain individuals who find in Twelve-Step programs a vehicle of spirituality.

NOTES

1. Peter Steinfels, "Clerics wonder whether religion can learn lessons from recovery programs for addicts," *The New York Times*, April 28 1990.

2. Wendy Kaminer, *I'm Dysfunctional, You're Dysfunctional* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1992); Charles J. Sykes, *A Nation of Victims* (New York: St. Martin's, 1992).

3. Bill W[ilson], *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (New York: A.A. World Services, 1953), 21-22.

4. John E. Mack, “Alcoholism, A.A., and the Governance of the Self,” in *Dynamic Approaches to the Understanding and Treatment of Alcoholism*, eds. Norman E. Zinberg, and Margaret H. Bean (New York: Free Press, 1981), 128-162; Edward J. Khantzian and John E. Mack, “Alcoholics Anonymous and Contemporary Psychodynamic Theory,” in *Recent Developments in Alcoholism: vol. 7 of Treatment Research*, ed. Marc Galanter (New York: Plenum Press, 1989), 67-89.

5. For an analysis of A.A. in these terms, see the writings of Harry M. Tiebout, especially “Therapeutic Mechanisms of Alcoholics Anonymous,” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 100 (1944): 468-473; “The Act of Surrender in the Therapeutic Process,” *Quarterly Journal of Studies on Alcohol* 10 (1949): 48-58; “Surrender vs. Compliance in Therapy,” *Quarterly Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, 14 (1953): 58-68; and “The Ego Factor in Surrender in Alcoholism,” *Quarterly Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, 15 (1954): 610-621.

6. W[ilson], *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, 63.

7. A.A. members affectionately refer to the book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, as the “Big Book.” The term originated when those who produced it, hoping to convince depression-era drunks that the \$3.50 book was worth purchasing, asked its printer to “use the heaviest paper he could find,” so that the book would be literally weighty. World War II rules on paper use required changing to more economical stock, but the name stuck.

8. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Univ. of Notre Dame, 1981), chap. 14; also see the editor’s “Introduction” to this volume.

9. *Alcoholics Anonymous* (New York: A.A. World Services, 1976), 569.

10. According to Wilson’s explanation of why Alcoholics Anonymous left the Oxford Group, this acceptance of limitation was the reason why A.A. came into being: “The Oxford Group wanted to save the world. I only wanted to save the drunks.” Wilson (New York) to McGhee B., 30 October 1940). A.A.’s Fifth Tradition is: “Each group has but one primary purpose -- to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers;” and its Tenth Tradition reads: “Alcoholics Anonymous has no opinion on

outside issues; hence the A.A. name ought never be drawn into public controversy.”

11. For the story of this effort, and its traces, see: Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham, *The Spirituality of Imperfection* (New York: Bantam, 1992), 130-131.

12. *Ibid.*; Kurtz and Ketcham directly explore Twelve-Step spirituality. For the wider context, see: Simon Tugwell, *Ways of Imperfection* (Springfield, Ill.: Templegate, 1985).

13. *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 64.

14. Walter Houston Clark, *The Oxford Group: Its History and Significance* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1952), 35.

15. Ernest Kurtz, *Not-God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous* (Center City, Minn.: Hazelden, 1979); this is the most fully documented presentation of A.A.’s history. It should be supplemented with two A.A. publications, *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age* (New York: A.A.W.S., 1957) and *Pass It On* (New York: A.A.W.S., 1984); also by Bill Pittman, *A.A.: The Way It Began* (Seattle, Wash.: Glen Abbey Books, 1988).

16. *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, 160-161.

17. For the original version of the Twelve Steps, with a more detailed discussion of the changes, see: Kurtz, *Not-God*, 70-71.

18. In 1961 Wilson wrote to Jung telling the Swiss psychiatrist of his role in A.A.’s origins. Jung’s reply indicated familiarity with Alcoholics Anonymous and offered a directly spiritual understanding of alcoholism and recovery from it. This correspondence, slightly edited, appears in *The A.A. Grapevine* issues of January 1963 and 1968 and in *The Language of the Heart* (New York: A.A. Grapevine, Inc., 1988), 276-281.

19. The stories in the first and second editions of *Alcoholics Anonymous* attest to this; Wilson himself had an unconventional religious upbringing and never affiliated with any denomination.

20. Aldous Huxley, *Moksha* (Los Angeles: J.P. Tarcher, 1977).

21. The problem was stated by St. Basil who noted that “the defect of the solitary life was that it provided no opportunity to practice the virtues

of humility and patience or to perform the practical works of mercy -- ‘If you live alone, whose feet will you wash?’”; Clifford Hugh Lawrence, *Medieval Monasticism: Forms of Religious Life in Western Europe in the Middle Ages* (London: Longman, 1989 [1984]), 10.

22. Most A.A. members strenuously deny that their program is one of “self-help”; the usual comment runs: “Self-help . . . we tried that, and it didn’t work; that’s why we’re a God-help program.”

Some recent imitators, wandering from Twelve-Step insight, can seem to foster self-centeredness by suggesting that involvements with others are their adherents’ problem. The emblem of “Co-Dependents Anonymous, Inc.” that appears on its literature, “To Thine Own Self Be True,” illustrates the point – perhaps especially for those aware of the line’s context in *Hamlet*. The other words on the emblem are “Discovery, Recovery, Self, Respect [Self-Respect?]”. Compare this with the terms on the A.A. emblem imitated: “Recovery, Unity, Service.” A.A. specifies its “Third Legacy” as “Service,” and in 1965 made a commitment to “The Declaration,” which pledges: “I Am Responsible.”

23. *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, 120; W[ilson], *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, 178; also Kurtz, *Not-God*, 108.

The language and practice of some A.A. groups has led to the formation of “Rational Recovery” groups and “Secular Organizations for Sobriety”; see James Christopher, *How to Stay Sober: Recovery Without Religion* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1988). Such groups, which do not claim to offer a Twelve-Step program, have thus far drawn few members; on atheists and agnostics and the Twelve Steps, see: Jon R. Weinberg, *A.A.: An Interpretation for the Nonbeliever* (Center City, Minn.: Hazelden, 1975).

24. Wilson, “Our Anonymity Is Both Inspiration and Safety,” *A.A. Grapevine* (March 1946) and “Why Alcoholics Anonymous is Anonymous,” *A.A. Grapevine* (January 1955); both are reprinted in *The Language of the Heart*, 16-20, 209-218.

25. The letter from Jung (Zurich) to Wilson, 30 January 1961, has been frequently reproduced, e.g.: *The Language of the Heart: Bill W.’s Grapevine Writings* (New York: A.A. Grapevine, Inc., 1988), 280-281.

26. W[ilson], *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, 140-142; The traditions referred to here are 5, 6, and 7: “5. Each group has but one primary purpose --to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers. 6. An A.A. group ought never endorse, finance, or lend the A.A. name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property, and prestige divert us from our primary purpose. 7. Every A.A. group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions.”

27. Betty Ford, *The Times of My Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978).

28. See, for example: Stanton Peele, *The Diseasing of America: Addiction Treatment Out of Control* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington Books, 1989).

29. Letter from “Doc N.,” *The Grapevine*, 1. 3 (August 1944); see also the letter from “Doc M.” of Shelby, N.C., in the following issue.

30. There are fifteen sets of such “Guidelines”: lists and order forms for all A.A. literature may be obtained from A.A. World Services, Inc., 475 Riverside Drive, New York, N.Y. 10115; “A.S.A.P.” = Alcohol Safety Action Programs, which were especially popular among police forces in this era.

31. The literature is vast, but a good beginning would include Tadeusz Gieryski and Terence Williams, “Codependency,” *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs* 18:1 (1986), 7-13; William R. Miller, “Adult Cousins of Alcoholics,” *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors* 1:1 (1987), 74-76; Edith S. Lisansky Gomberg, “On Terms Used and Abused: The Concept of ‘Codependency,’” Edith S. Lisansky Gomberg (ed.), *Current Issues in Alcohol/Drug Studies* (New York: Haworth, 1989), 113-132; Rick A. Myer *et al.*, “Co-dependency: An Examination of Underlying Assumptions,” *Journal of Mental Health Counseling*, 13:4 (1991) 449-458.

Robin Room, “Alcoholics Anonymous as a Social Movement,” Barbara S. McCrady and William R. Miller (eds.), *Research on Alcoholics Anonymous: Opportunities and Alternatives* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers Center for Alcohol Studies, 1993), 167-187; this text specifically delineates conflicts between “the ideology of codependence” and the

Twelve-Step vision. For the more popular perception, see: Alison Humes, “The Culting of Codependency,” *7 Days*, November 1, 1989; and for a literature review, see: Carol LeMasters, “Reading Codependency,” *Christianity and Crisis* (June 18, 1990), 200-203.

32. The distribution of ideas in early A.A. can be seen in the stories printed in the first edition of *Alcoholics Anonymous*; on the affinity with traditional mysticism, see: Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1991).

33. Wilson’s A.A. *Grapevine* articles have been collected and published in the book, *The Language of the Heart*. On recent events, see: James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991); and Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion* (Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1988).

34. Miguel d’Unamuno, *The Tragic Sense of Life* (New York: Dover Publications, 1954 [1921]), 17; the final point is illustrated in many A.A. *Grapevine* stories, see: “Ginger” in the February 1992 issue (vol. 48, no. 9), 50-53.

35. Lewis Yablonsky, *The Tunnel Back: Synanon* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1965), 49-55.

36. The final quotation is from: Robin Room, “Healing Ourselves and Our Planet” (Paper presented at the 18th Annual Alcohol Epidemiology Symposium of the Kettil Bruun Society for Social and Epidemiological Research on Alcohol, Toronto, June 1-5, 1992).; see also: Frank Riessman and Timothy Bay, “The Politics of Self-Help,” *Social Policy* 23:2 (1992), 28-38.

37. One of the women the authors interviewed named her private faith ‘Sheilaism’ after herself; it included a belief in God and an intention to love and care for herself and others. See: Robert N. Bellah *et al.*, *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 221, 235.

38. *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age* (New York: A.A. World Services, 1957), 74-75.