

A.A. : Guilt and God for the Gullible

By Charles Bufe

After twenty years of heavy drinking, blackouts, DWIs, wrecked cars, and one long stretch in jail, I quit drinking. I decided I was wasting my life and finally admitted the obvious to myself - that I was becoming more and more isolated, that alcohol was quickly becoming my only friend. So I stopped. I didn't even bother with A.A. because of prior experiences with the organization.

Two years earlier I had become concerned about my drinking and checked out a few A.A. meetings. I didn't like what I found: smoke filled rooms, a religious, cult-like atmosphere, and chain-smokers bragging about how working the A.A. steps had freed them from their addiction. An acquaintance put the matter succinctly: "A lot of those meetings are like a scene from Invasion of the Body Snatchers." So I decided that A.A. was even worse than drinking.

Looking back on it, I was looking for an excuse to continue drinking and A.A. certainly provided it.

All is not well in alcoholism treatment programs, either. In addition to the disorganization I found at the treatment center I attended, there are other problems. One is that most counsellors apparently have been alcoholics, have gotten sober through A.A., and adhere religiously to its principles. Participation in A.A. is a group requirement for group participants at most treatment centers, and an atmosphere of A.A. religiosity permeates many programs. This is a common problem in treatment situations.

Another problem is that many

counsellors and administrators in such programs are power-trippers and seem to enjoy laying down and enforcing arbitrary rules governing participants' behaviour. This is an especially serious problem in alcoholism treatment programs because those in the early stages of recovery from alcohol dependence tend to be very vulnerable emotionally.

Probably the worst thing about A.A. is its religiosity. The centrepiece of the A.A. dogma is, unfortunately, the Twelve Steps. God or a "Power greater than ourselves" is mentioned in fully half of the steps. Thus, anyone with honesty to admit that the existence of god is no more likely than the existence of Santa Claus is, at the least, made to feel very uncomfortable at most A.A. meetings. What makes matters worse is that "A.A. makes zombies" as a matter of course, tell those new to the program, that if they don't follow the steps, they'll never make it - they'll start drinking again. That is often a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Life is filled with annoyances, dangers and uncertainties, and like most people, steps-o-maniacs don't want to face them; they don't want to be adults. They want a Big Brother to take care of them.

The religious beliefs of most A.A. members do not free them, as they would like to believe, from their dependence on alcohol; rather they act as a substitute for it. If they were actually free, they wouldn't need the fix of regular meetings and the constant reinforcement of their comforting but irrational beliefs.

Guilt is another bothersome

aspect of Alcoholics Anonymous religiosity. The Twelve Steps are replete with references to "our wrongs, our shortcomings," and "making amends." This places responsibility for the alcoholic's addiction squarely on his or her shoulders. Not only does this induce guilt, it's also thoroughly unscientific and is just plain wrong. Modern research has clearly shown that alcoholism is a matter of genetics, that alcoholics have about as much choice in the matter as they do about the colour of their eyes. A.A. induced guilt only serves to make dealing with the very real problems recovering alcoholics face even more difficult.

An additional problem related to religiosity is hypocrisy. There's a saying in A.A.: "Fake it until you make it." What that means in practice is that newcomers should sit on their doubts and mouth the A.A. line until they forget they ever had doubts. Thus hypocrisy is an essential element in the cloning process of the step-zombies. An acquaintance told me that he had recently mentioned certain doubts at an A.A. meeting. After it was over, his sponsor (a sort of Big Brother within A.A.) told him he wasn't supposed to criticize A.A. itself. Puzzled, he replied that he thought A.A. was supposed to be a program of honesty. To that, his sponsor said, "Yes, but you shouldn't criticize the organization." He replied, "I think I don't need a sponsor."

Sponsors are supposed to provide newcomers with advice and assistance, but many end up running the lives of those they're supposed to be helping. Naturally, the position of sponsor attracts meddling busybodies who love to control others. They often hang around A.A. meetings on the lookout for newcomers, like vultures on the lookout for fresh meat. Newcomers, like all people in the early stages of recovery from alcoholism, are

emotionally vulnerable and often fall into the clutches of these buzzards. If you've recently quit drinking, are checking out A.A., and someone, unasked, says to you, "I think you need a sponsor," don't walk, RUN in the opposite direction. So much for the negative aspects of Alcoholics Anonymous. There are also positive ones. A very good feature is that A.A. is open to all, the only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking. No identification is required, and there are no dues or fees.

Another good feature is that A.A. is decentralized. Groups are autonomous, and there is no hierarchy giving orders to the membership. Among other things, this leaves room in A.A. for dissident groups and members.

But the most important feature is that A.A. works, at least for some people. Why? I believe there are three main reasons. One is that A.A. is an important social outlet for many. Loneliness is a terrible problem in our society, and people will flock to almost anything that relieves it - even A.A. meetings.

A second and related reason is that A.A. meetings allow alcoholics to realize that their problems are not unique. Meetings provide members with the opportunity to vent feelings, and to give and receive emotional support, and oftentimes useful advice, on ways to avoid drinking.

The third reason is that the A.A. steps provide structure - a well groomed path to follow - and that can look awfully attractive when your world has turned upside down and you no longer have your best friend - alcohol - to lean on. I believe that to a large degree the content of the steps is irrelevant. What is actually important is that the steps are there and that those dependent upon them believe that they're the means for overcoming alcoholism. Another way of spelling

recovery-via-the-steps is placebo.

These things, especially the first two, are all that is really needed. Any program that provides alcoholics with the opportunity to meet, talk, and support one another on a regular basis will work; it will help alcoholics stay sober. A structure similar to the steps - but without the religiosity and blame-laying would be an additional help. Rational means include: realization that the only way for alcoholics to control drinking is simply not to do it; expression of emotions that have been submerged in a sea of booze, often since childhood; becoming as well informed about the medical and psychological aspects of alcoholism as possible; honesty with oneself and others; self-analysis through keeping a journal; and developing mutually supportive relationships with others. Working with these materials, it's very easy to construct a much sturdier set of steps than that provided by A.A.

A non-religious national organization for recovering alcoholics and recovered alcoholics has been badly needed. If there were one anywhere near the scope of Alcoholics Anonymous, it would almost certainly help far more people to sobriety than A.A. does (A.A. claims a 10 percent recovery

rate, which is probably optimistic).

Fortunately, two fledgling non-religious organizations have recently appeared. One is American Atheists Addiction Recovery Groups (AAARG), which is sponsored by Madalyn Murray O'Hair's group, American Atheists, Box 140195, Austin, Tx 78714-0195.

The other, larger group is Secular Organizations for Sobriety (SOS). SOS is intended for all those put off by A.A.'s religiosity, but not just atheists. SOS can be contacted by mail via Box 1581, North Hollywood, CA 91615, and by phone at (818) 980-8851. At the last count there were 50 locations scattered across the country.

But until these organizations become considerably larger, most of those who wish to free themselves of alcohol use have little choice but to use existing treatment programs and A.A. These can provide a lot of help if approached sceptically and used intelligently. Much as many A.A. steps-o-maniacs would like you to believe it, it is not necessary to give up your rationality and integrity to free yourself of alcoholism. I and a lot of other happy, sober people are living evidence of that fact.