

Emmet Fox and New Thought

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The problem of pain and suffering: Emmet Fox and New Thought

One extreme answer to the problem of pain and suffering was given in the New Thought movement, which had a great influence on many of the Protestants in early AA. These New Thought authors taught that pain and suffering were fundamentally produced, not by external conditions, but by wrong thinking. If we changed the way we thought, the external world would change to match our new ideas. This group of American and British teachers, preachers, writers, and healers included Phineas Parkhurst Quimby (1802-1866), Emma Curtis Hopkins (1849-1925), Thomas Troward (1847-1916), and Emmet Fox (1886-1951). I would also include, as part of this tradition, a number of more recent figures such as Louise Hay (b. 1926), Helen Schucman (1909-1981), and Marianne Williamson (b. 1952), although these three latter figures of course had no influence on the world of early AA.

The New Thought movement has at this time not been studied much or usually even taken with much seriousness by academic theologians and scholarly historians of thought. Even the largest New Thought denominational organizations (Unity Church, Church of Divine Science, and Religious Science) are quite small. Yet Louise Hay's *You Can Heal Your Life* (1984) has sold 35 million copies to date (as opposed to 30 million copies for the AA Big

Book), and even the works of some of the other New Thoughts authors have sometimes sold quite well. Marianne Williamson's *A Return to Love: Reflections on the Principles of A Course in Miracles* (1992) has sold 3 million copies. Helen Schucman's *A Course in Miracles* (1975) has sold 2 million copies. Emmet Fox's *Sermon on the Mount* has sold 600,000 copies and his *Power Through Constructive Thinking* over 500,000, so just counting these two books alone, over a million copies of his writings have been sold. New Thought has been a big movement in the English-speaking world, and its popularity has been growing continuously over the last century. It definitely made its mark on some of the beliefs of early Alcoholics Anonymous.

The New Thought movement was influenced in its earliest stages by both Hinduism and ancient Platonism. They believed that the phenomenal world external to our own minds was a form of what the Hindu tradition called *maya*, that is, they held that the material world around us was simply an "illusion," a screen of false and unreal things which blocked us from knowledge of the transcendent Godhead.

The ancient Greek philosopher Plato was even more influential on the major New Thought authors. In the Allegory of the Cave, ancient Platonic philosophy had spoken of ordinary unenlightened human beings as living like prisoners chained since birth in a dark cave where they could see only a world of black and white images, the shadows of a puppet show cast on the back wall of the cave by the light from a flickering fire behind them. The prisoners had never been allowed to turn their heads and see either the puppet masters or the puppets, so they believed that the shadows case on the wall of the cave were the real world. In Plato's elaborate metaphor or allegory, this shadow world represented the realm of *doxa*, mere "opinion" or "belief," based on things other people had told us and the indoctrination we had received as children about the way we "should" believe.

In the more extreme forms of Platonic philosophy, *doxa* meant something very close to what Hinduism called *maya*, that is, a world

of pure illusion and falsehood. In Plato's metaphor, if we prisoners could become freed from our chains, we would be able to climb out of the cave and ascend up into the real world, which was the realm of the true ideas of things, lit by the light of the Good Itself. Most of the Catholic and Orthodox theologians of early Christianity were Christian Platonists, who equated Plato's supreme Good with the Christian God, and believed that it was the spiritual world (not the material world) which was eternal and far more truly real.

In the way New Thought used this basic metaphor, of captives to illusion who could be freed from their chains by learning how to "see through" the illusion and discover its falsity, if we were feeling pain and suffering—including inner resentment, continual inner rage, fear, worry, anxiety, shame, and guilt, but also pain and suffering caused by external and material things such as physical illness, problems in our relationships with other people, money problems, lawsuits, and so on—we could heal these problems simply by learning how to think about them differently. We can immediately see the enormous impact of this idea on the AA movement across the board. Whenever someone in an AA group starts complaining about his or her life and the way other people are behaving, it does not take long for a good old timer to say words to this effect: "What saved my life was discovering that it was not other people who were the real problem in my life, it was me, and what was going on in my own head. What finally brought me peace of mind was discovering that it was not external circumstances which were destroying me, but the way I was thinking about them. The enemy is not out there; my greatest enemy is inside my own head." This absolutely central AA belief, and the enormous emphasis placed upon it, came from New Thought. It did not come from the Oxford Group or the Protestant fundamentalists, nor did it come from the liberal Protestants or from the huge wave of Roman Catholics who began joining AA in the Spring of 1939.

William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience*—a book which was read by Bill Wilson and many other early AA people—talked about the New Thought movement in the chapter on "The Religion

of Healthy-Mindedness,” where James sometimes referred to it as the “mind-cure” movement, making special reference to their frequent claims that they could teach people to cure physical ailments by learning to think positive and healthy thoughts.¹ James’ main criticism of New Thought, repeated several times in that section of the book, was that their philosophy never explained where evil was coming from or how it could arise. It was all well and good to say that all human pain and suffering were the product of illusion, but in a good universe created by a good and loving God, how could such an illusion have come into being in the first place? This was an interesting question, but the lack of a good answer did not seem to have bothered early AA people.

The major connecting link between New Thought and Alcoholics Anonymous was Emmet Fox (1886-1951), one of the most famous New Thought speakers and authors of the 1930’s and 40’s. He had been chosen in 1931 to be the minister of the Church of the Healing Christ in New York City. His most famous book, *The Sermon on the Mount*, first came out in 1934. Another well known work of his, *Power Through Constructive Thinking*, was not published until 1940 (after the AA Big Book came out in 1939), but was constructed from pamphlets and leaflets on a variety of spiritual topics, some of them copyrighted as early as 1932.² So I will occasionally cite this latter book as well: the early AA’s were also exposed to those ideas during the years 1935 to 1939, from going to hear Fox’s sermons and from picking up pamphlets and leaflets while they were there, even though this material had not yet been printed up in book form.

Fox’s importance to AA history was pointed out at an early date by Jim Burwell, a famous early AA member who came into the program in New York City in 1938. At some point prior to the end of 1947, Jim wrote a little history of early AA entitled “Memoirs of Jimmy: The Evolution of Alcoholics Anonymous.”³ Commenting on the way Bill Wilson wrote the Big Book, he said:

Bill probably got most of his ideas from one of these books, namely James’ “Varieties of Religious Experience.” I have always felt this was because Bill himself had undergone such

a violent spiritual experience. He also gained a fine basic insight of spirituality through Emmet Fox's "Sermon on the Mount," and a good portion of the psychological approach of AA from Dick Peabody's "Common Sense of Drinking."

Although one could argue that this claim that these three books supplied most of the ideas in the Big Book was an oversimplification, one should note the way in which one of the major early East Coast AA's emphasized the importance of Emmet Fox for understanding many aspects of the Big Book and early AA thought.

AA historian Mel B., who had his first encounter with AA in the late 1940's and got permanently sober in 1950 (he now has sixty-two years of sobriety), had the blessing of having frequent contact with Bill W. during one point in his life, when Mel was living in the New York City area and was on the *Grapevine* committee at AA headquarters. This gave him an opportunity to ask Bill directly about the sources of many of his ideas. Mel later stated in an article he wrote on Emmet Fox that

I have long believed that some of my best spiritual help has come from reading the books of Emmet Fox, especially *The Sermon on the Mount*. I also learned in a brief discussion with Bill W. that he and the other pioneer AA's attended Emmet Fox's lectures in New York in the late 1930's and benefitted from them.⁴

And Doug B., likewise a very knowledgeable and reliable AA historian, also dated the New York AA group's devoted following of Emmet Fox back into the 1930's, through contacts within his own family:

My mother-in-law used to attend many of Emmet Fox's talks in New York in the 30's and 40's. She said she would see Bill W. at many of them and that Bill always had a group of men with him. When I asked her if there was anything about Bill's group that she remembered, like fidgeting, coughing, smoking, talking, etc., she replied that the only thing that

stood out, besides the fact that they all stayed close together, was that they were always “very well dressed.”⁵

It was not just Bill Wilson who was interested in Emmet Fox’s ideas. Igor I. Sikorsky, Jr., in his book on Fox and Jung, noted that “five of the original stories in the Big Book were by early AA members deeply influenced by Emmet Fox.”⁶ In Akron, Dr. Bob would regularly give newcomers a copy of Fox’s *Sermon on the Mount* to read.⁷ Mel B., in his book *New Wine*, said that “Mike E., the second AA member from Detroit, often mentioned the inspiration he received from Fox’s book when he started his recovery in 1938, even before the publication of *Alcoholics Anonymous*.”⁸ Later on, Glenn “Tex” Brown, who was a leader in AA in the Chicago area for 53 years, said that Emmet Fox’s *Sermon on the Mount* was as popular as the Big Book when he first came into AA in the Chicago suburb of Skokie, Illinois on February 6, 1947.⁹ Mel B. (who got sober in 1950), in speaking of his own personal experience of early AA, said in a message to an AA history group that “I am very grateful that I spent my first months in sobriety in Pontiac, Michigan, where the group offered Emmet Fox’s *The Sermon on the Mount* and other items that have been very helpful to me over the years.”¹⁰

In March 1944, a special kind of link was established between Emmet Fox and the AA movement, when the son of Fox’s secretary joined AA. This was a man named Harold A. “Al” Steckman. He became very active in AA. He was the author of the Responsibility Pledge recited at the Toronto International in 1965 (“I am responsible. When anyone, anywhere, reaches out for help, I want the hand of AA always to be there. And for that I am responsible”) and also wrote the Declaration of Unity used at the Miami International in 1970. In his later years, he wrote a book called *Bert D.: Hardhat, Inebriate, Scholar*. He was at various points Director of the New York Intergroup Association, a Trustee, *Grapevine* Director and *Grapevine* Editor.¹¹

When Al became the *Grapevine* Editor in 1949, the magazine wasn't too well known around the country. There were many months when he wrote the entire issue by himself, signing each article with a different set of initials and giving a different locality.¹²

As editor of the *Grapevine*, Al also changed the basic nature of the major AA periodical when he “shifted editorial emphasis away from drunk stories to You're Not Drinking—Now What.”¹³

A profound shift in AA had taken place around the time the Big Book was published in 1939. Prior to that point, parts of the AA movement at least were still linked to the Oxford Group. But in the AA literature written in the decade after the publication of the Big Book, during the 1940's, there were no mentions of Oxford Group books, and no recommendations—none at all—that any Oxford Group books be read. The Oxford Group connection was dead. But there was a significant contingent within the AA fellowship during the 1940's which was strongly devoted to Emmet Fox and New Thought spirituality, as we have just seen, and newcomers *were* very strongly urged to read New Thought books.

The effect of this on AA was extremely positive. In the first four years of AA history (1935-39) AA membership grew 20 times larger, which may seem quite impressive until we look at what happened over the next ten years (1939-49), when AA membership grew over 750 times larger. Breaking with the Oxford Group and shifting (in part) to a major emphasis on the writings of Emmet Fox and the New Thought movement was an intrinsic part of the era which saw the greatest growth in all of Alcoholics Anonymous history.¹⁴

Time Span — Total Members

1935 — 5 members

1935-1939 — 100 members

1939-1949 — 75,625 members

As an example of the way that the newer AA literature of the 1940's was emphasizing the importance of New Thought ideas,

there was a suggested reading list at the end of the first edition of the little pamphlet called the *Akron Manual* (published c. June 1942) which was handed out to alcoholics when they entered St. Thomas Hospital in Akron for detoxing. This pamphlet, which presumably had the approval of both Dr. Bob and Sister Ignatia, strongly recommended that alcoholics who were new to the AA program read Emmet Fox's *Sermon on the Mount*, as well as another New Thought classic, James Allen's *As a Man Thinketh* (1902).¹⁵

As a second example, after the publication of the Big Book, the most commonly used beginners lessons in early AA were based on the four-week Beginners Lessons that began to be used in early Detroit A.A. in June 1943. The pamphlet which outlined these lessons was printed and reprinted by AA groups all over the U.S. in subsequent years, and referred to variously as the *Detroit Pamphlet*, the *Washington D.C. Pamphlet* (the first version printed on a printing press), the *Tablemate*, the *Table Leader's Guide*, and so on. There were also printed editions published in Seattle, Oklahoma City, Minneapolis, etc.¹⁶

The Detroit version had a long passage from Emmet Fox at the end, a little piece called "Staying on the Beam."¹⁷

Today most commercial flying is done on a radio beam. A directional beam is produced to guide the pilot to his destination, and as long as he keeps on this beam he knows that he is safe, even if he cannot see around him for fog, or get his bearings in any other way.

As soon as he gets off the beam in any direction he is in danger, and he immediately tries to get back on to the beam once more. Those who believe in the All-ness of God, have a spiritual beam upon which to navigate on the voyage of life. As long as you have peace of mind and some sense of the Presence of God you are on the beam, and you are safe, even if outer things seem to be confused or even very dark; but as soon as you get off the beam you are in danger.

You are off the beam the moment you are angry or resentful or jealous or frightened or depressed; and when such a condition arises you should immediately get back on the

beam by turning quietly to God in thought, claiming His Presence, claiming that His Love and Intelligence are with you, and that the promises in the Bible are true today.

If you do this you are back on the beam, even if outer conditions and your own feelings do not change immediately. You are back on the beam and you will reach port in safety.

Keep on the beam and nothing shall by any means hurt you.

Now Fox warns here, in the next-to-last paragraph, that you will sometimes find yourself in situations in which “outer conditions and your own feelings do not change immediately.” You cannot expect all your pain and suffering to vanish instantly, he cautions, simply by turning your thoughts away from the problems and towards God.

Nevertheless, Fox promises that if we keep turning to God in the way that he teaches, every possible kind of pain and hardship will fairly quickly disappear:

Let us suppose, for the sake of example, that on a certain Monday, your affairs are in such a condition that, humanly speaking, certain consequences are sure to follow before the end of the week. These may be legal consequences, perhaps of a very unpleasant nature following upon some decision of the courts; or they may be certain physical consequences in the human body. A competent physician may decide that a perilous operation will be absolutely necessary, or he may even feel it his duty to say that there is no chance for the recovery of the patient. Now, if someone can raise his consciousness above the limitations of the physical plane in connection with the matter—and this is only a scientific description of what is commonly called prayer—then the conditions on that plane will change, and, in some utterly unforeseen and normally impossible manner, the legal tragedy will melt away, and to the advantage, be it noted, of all parties to the case; or the patient will be healed instead of having to undergo the operation, or of having to die.

In other words, miracles, in the popular sense of the word, can and do happen as the result of prayer. *Prayer does change*

things It makes no difference at all what sort of difficulty you may be in. It does not matter what the causes may have been that led up to it. Enough prayer will get you out of your difficulty if only you will be persistent enough in your appeal to God.¹⁸

And Fox assures us that if we only turned to God and sought God first, there would never be any need to fall into sickness or ill-health, or to fall into material poverty, or to experience family troubles and quarrels.¹⁹

The problem was that in December 1940, when Father Dowling visited Bill Wilson for the first time, Bill had been mired in what seemed to be continuous defeat and disappointment for so long, that the optimistic New Thought instruction to simply think about God and think positive thoughts until the problems went away, no longer seemed in the slightest bit realistic.

Emmet Fox: radical New Thought ideas against an Irish Catholic background

One of the biggest problems which most newcomers to AA have in dealing with the spiritual aspects of the program when they first come in, is that they are absolutely terrified of God. In fact this is the case with most people in the western world: each time they start to come into real contact with the living presence of God, their first instinctive reaction is to shut their eyes, plug their ears, and jerk back in raw fear. So effective spiritual teaching has to continually work at reassuring people that God loves them, and is not going to harm them but is going to befriend them and heal them. Early AA switched from Oxford Group literature to Emmet Fox's *Sermon on the Mount* because Fox did such a much better job of calming the newcomers' fears. And he still does: his book still works just as well today. Fox told newcomers point blank that the idea of a cruel, vindictive, punishing God which scared them so much was nothing but an imaginary bogeyman from an ancient and superstitious world:

Men built up absurd and very horrible fables about a limited and man-like God who conducted his universe very much as a rather ignorant and barbarous prince might conduct the affairs of a small Oriental kingdom. All sorts of human weaknesses, such as vanity, fickleness, and spite, were attributed to this being. Then a farfetched and very inconsistent legend was built up concerning original sin, vicarious blood atonement, infinite punishment for finite transgressions; and, in certain cases, an unutterably horrible doctrine of predestination to eternal torment, or eternal bliss, was added. Now, no such theory as this is taught in the Bible. If it were the object of the Bible to teach it, it would be clearly stated in a straightforward manner in some chapter or other; but it is not.²⁰

The real Jesus did not go around inventing hundreds of rules and laws, Fox said, and telling us that we would suffer eternal hellfire for breaking a single one of them. In fact he discouraged “hard-and-fast rules and regulations of every kind. What he insisted upon was a certain spirit in one's conduct, and he was careful to teach principles only, knowing that when the spirit is right, details will take care of themselves.” That is, Jesus certainly never denied that we had to act morally toward our fellow human beings. But it was the spirit of the law rather than the letter of the law that we needed to follow, where the spirit of the law could normally be summed up as a command to treat other human beings with love and compassion.²¹

Emmet Fox (1886-1951), in spite of the radicalism of his later ideas, was in fact born into a pious Roman Catholic family in Ireland and received his early formative education at a Catholic grammar school run by Jesuits: St. Ignatius' College at Stamford Hill in north London. At a young age however, he began to fall under the influence of the New Thought movement, and eventually came over to America, where in 1931 he was ordained by the Divine Science Church, one of the three largest New Thought denominations in the United States, and appointed as pastor of the Church of the Healing Christ in New York City.

So he ended up as a *pro forma* Protestant, according to the normal definition of that term. Yet I believe that to speak of him in this way is at one level misleading. It is true that Fox's religious position was quite radical—there was no conceivable way that the Vatican or any proper believer could ever have regarded most of his teachings as anything other than a total denial of the Roman Catholic faith!—but there were still strongly Catholic elements in his thought.

So for example, Fox did not interpret the Bible literally (in the typical Protestant fashion) but in the kind of allegorical fashion which was used by the Catholic and Orthodox authors of the Early Christian period, beginning in the first century A.D. (the New Testament often read the Old Testament in allegorical fashion), and extending through the second and third century and beyond, all the way through to the end of the Middle Ages. By allegorical, I mean in the broadest sense, the kind of interpretive method used in medieval Catholic art and scriptural interpretation where various items in the biblical text were interpreted as symbols or metaphors of higher realities.

So in biblical phrases like “give us this day our daily bread,” the word bread symbolizes not only physical food, Fox teaches, but also things like “spiritual perception, spiritual understanding, and preeminently spiritual realization.” The word heart does not refer to the organ in my chest which pumps blood, but is a symbol for what modern psychology calls the subconscious mind. The word city in the Bible always stands allegorically for my human consciousness, Fox says, and the terms hill or mountain refer metaphorically to prayer or spiritual activity. So when the Bible speaks of the need to become like “a city set upon a hill,” this means allegorically that your proper goal is to build your human consciousness upon a foundation of prayer and turn it into “the Golden City, the City of God” that shines out over all the world. Likewise when the Bible speaks of bringing offerings and placing them upon an altar, the “altar” is our own human consciousness, and the “offerings” which we bring are the prayers we speak. When we are asked in the Bible to make offerings which are described as “burnt sacrifices,” what we

are really being asked to do is to take all our erroneous thoughts about life and the world, and destroy or burn away these wrong thoughts upon the divine altar of our human consciousness.²²

I have never made a systematic study, but I believe that most of Fox's allegorical interpretations were drawn by him directly from some point or other within the ancient Catholic tradition. Some of his interpretations were especially profound and led the early AA's straight to the heart of a life truly dedicated to God. They were like the ecstatic cries of the greatest of the medieval Catholic saints and mystics, such as Fox's interpretation of the phrase "poor in spirit":

To be poor in spirit means to have emptied yourself of all desire to exercise personal self-will, and, what is just as important, to have renounced all preconceived opinions in the wholehearted search for God. It means to be willing to set aside your present habits of thought, your present views and prejudices, your present way of life if necessary; to jettison, in fact, anything and everything that can stand in the way of your finding God.²³

For Fox, God was conceived in fundamentally the same way as the medieval Catholic tradition had understood him, as a divine *Nous* (the Greek word for Mind) or *Intellectus* (the Latin word for Intelligence) which presided over the universe. Fox therefore characteristically described God as the "Divine Mind," the "Great Mind," or "Infinite Mind."²⁴

Like a number of other modern philosophers however, Fox was deeply impressed with all the new twentieth-century scientific discoveries about universal process. He saw the need to introduce a more dynamic element into the concept of God. God could no longer believably be thought of in medieval fashion as merely the passive Unmoved Mover in a universe based on teleological causal processes. Modern science understood causation in a different way. We had to talk of God today as an *Energetikos*, a Power or Force, "a source of energy stronger than electricity, more potent than high explosive; unlimited and inexhaustible." If God was mind or intelligence, this divine reality had to be more than a realm of pure,

unchanging Platonic ideas. God had to be in some way a *Creative Intelligence* (the term Bill Wilson later liked to use), a Mind which “is ever seeking for more and new expression.” This divine drive for continual creativity and novelty underlies all human life at a profound level: an individual human being is in fact God’s-creativity-in-action, “the dynamic Thinking of that Mind,” an opening through which Infinite Energy is seeking a creative outlet.”²⁵

Emmet Fox states that God comes to consciousness within us, in such a way that God sees the universe through our eyes, as we begin to become conscious of God in ourselves. This sounds radical indeed, and yet it is especially here that we hear echoes of a number of Catholic and Orthodox authors from the early Christian and medieval periods: John Scotus Eriugena (an Irishman just like Emmet Fox) and Meister Eckhart, for example, along with the great fourth century Cappadocian theologians who spoke of each individual human spirit as an individual *hypostasis* of God, and who spoke of the created universe (taken as a totality) as a temporal *hypostasis* within God’s eternal divine *ousia* (being or substance). Fox expressed his version of this idea as follows:

Man being manifestation or expression of God has a limitless destiny before him. His work is to express, in concrete, definite form, the abstract ideas with which God furnishes him, and in order to do this, he must have creative power. If he did not have creative power, he would be merely a machine through which God worked—an automaton. But man is not an automaton; he is an individualized consciousness. God individualizes Himself in an infinite number of distinct focal points of consciousness, each one quite different; and therefore each one is a distinct way of knowing the universe, each a distinct experience The consciousness of each one is distinct from God and from all others, and yet none are separated. How can this be? How can two things be one, and yet not one and the same? The answer is that in matter, which is finite, they cannot; but in Spirit, which is infinite, they can. With our present limited, three-

dimensional consciousness, we cannot see this; but intuitively we can understand it through prayer. If God did not individualize Himself, there would be only one experience; as it is, there are as many universes as there are individuals to form them through thinking.²⁶

Fox talked about this idea in even greater detail in the chapter on “The Wonder Child” which is placed at the beginning of his book *Power Through Constructive Thinking*. The divine power which runs through each of us, Fox says, is the power of *Being Itself*:

This extraordinary Power, mystic though I have rightly called it, is nevertheless very real, no mere imaginary abstraction, but actually the most practical thing there is. The existence of this Power is already well known to thousands of people in the world today, and has been known to certain enlightened souls for tens of thousands of years. This Power is really no less than the primal Power of Being, and to discover that Power is the Divine birthright of all men. It is your right and your privilege to make your contact with this Power, and to allow it to work through your body, mind, and estate, so that you need no longer grovel upon the ground amid limitations and difficulties, but can soar up on wings like an eagle to the realm of dominion and joy.

But where, it will naturally be asked, is the wonderful, mystic Power to be contacted? Where may we find it? and how is it brought into action? The answer is perfectly simple—This Power is to be found within your own consciousness, the last place that most people would look for it. Right within your own mentality.²⁷

Emmet Fox: God as Creative Intelligence and the power of Being Itself

Now it is important to say once again, that I am not trying to turn Fox into an orthodox Roman Catholic theologian. Not at all! He had moved far beyond anything that could have been taught in a Roman Catholic school or university, or preached from a Roman Catholic

pulpit. Even if he had tried to moderate his ideas to some degree, and leave a few of his most radical notions unspoken, if Fox had tried to stay in the Catholic Church, I feel sure that he would have suffered the same fate as a contemporary of his, the Jesuit priest Father Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955), a member of the faculty at the Institut Catholique de Paris who in the 1920's was forbidden to teach anymore by both the Vatican and his Jesuit superiors. Although he was allowed to continue his paleontological work, his books and ideas were condemned, and the Catholic Church kept him fairly much totally muzzled for the rest of his life.

And yet, St. Thomas Aquinas himself—the standard of Roman Catholic orthodox theological teaching—had said that the only literal statement we could make about who God was, was to say that he was the power of Being Itself. That was the central idea of God in traditional Catholic teaching. Aquinas taught that anything else we said about God was only symbol or metaphor or allegory, or analogy, or involved *via negativa* statements or the like. This was fairly much what Emmet Fox was saying, and using the same technical language.

And that preeminently proper Catholic author Étienne Gilson, the greatest Thomistic scholar of the early twentieth century, made statements on occasion that also sounded just like what Fox was saying. God is not forced to create the universe or anything in it by any kind of natural necessity, Gilson wrote:

If God freely chooses to create ... it can be said that creation is the proper action of God—*creatio est propria Dei actio* In every being, to be is the prime act ... consequently, it belongs to every being, inasmuch as it is act, to desire to communicate its own perfection and to do so by causing effects similar to itself. And this is the very meaning of efficient causality. A universe of beings imitating God in that they are and are causes, such is the universe of Thomas Aquinas. In it, the actuality of being is an ontological generosity: *omne ens actu natum est agere aliquid actu*

existens; that is to say: “It is natural, for all being in act, to produce some actually existing being.”²⁸

But that was what Fox was saying. Gilson is saying here that God is *Creative Intelligence*, who is pure act, which in Thomistic language means that God is Being-in-action, Being-that-can-do-something, Being-that-can-be-the-cause-of-something-else. All the Beings in the universe which God creates then attempt to imitate him, in so far as their nature allows them to do so. That means that they themselves then try to create other things and cause other things to happen, and continually seek out (insofar as they are able) creative and novel ways of doing this.

And as Fox points out, human beings, who have more intelligence than any other of God’s created beings, by that ability have the greatest power to imitate God and be creative themselves. Above all, human beings have the power within their own minds, to create new ideas and new understandings of things, which is what is meant by the act of Being Itself. The technical term “act of Being Itself” refers to what takes place when we think of a new way of looking at things or a new way of doing things, or otherwise arrive at some new *creative insight* (to use the technical term employed by the great Jesuit Thomistic philosopher Bernard Lonergan²⁹) which will change the whole nature of the world of separate Beings which surrounds us.

This divine creativity within the human soul, that is, this ability to have new insights, to make a creative reassessment of my life, and change my fundamental way of looking at myself and the world around me—which provides me with my ability to change the basic cognitive structures of my mind, including even my most deeply cherished concepts and all my assumptions about “what good people should always do” and “what good people ought never to do”—is what Fox calls the Wonder Child:

This is the real meaning of such sayings in the Bible as “The Kingdom of God is within you” This Indwelling Power, the Inner Light, or Spiritual Idea, is spoken of in the Bible as a child, and throughout the Scriptures the child symbolically

always stands for this. Bible symbolism has its own beautiful logic, and just as the soul is always spoken of as a woman, so this, the Spiritual Idea that is born to the soul, is described as a child. The conscious discovery by you that you have this Power within you, and your determination to make use of it, is the birth of the child. And it is easy to see how very apt the symbol is, for the infant that is born in consciousness is just such a weak, feeble entity as any new-born child, and it calls for the same careful nursing. and guarding that any infant does in its earliest days.³⁰

By nurturing this ability, we allow ourselves to be illuminated, Fox says, by the divine Light:

Isaiah says: “The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.” This is a marvelous description of what happens when the Spiritual Idea, the child, is born to the soul. Walking in darkness, moral or physical, dwelling in the land of the shadow of death—the death of joy, or hope, or even self-respect [people suddenly discover their deliverer]. “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace” Once you have contacted the mystic Power within, and have allowed it to take over your responsibilities for you, it will direct and govern all your affairs from the greatest to the least without effort, and without mistakes, and without trouble to you. The government shall be upon his shoulder. You are tired, and driven, and worried, and weak, and ill, and depressed, because you have been trying to carry the government upon your own shoulder; the burden is too much for you, and you have broken down under it. Now, immediately you hand over your self-government, that is, the burden of making a living, or of healing your body, or erasing your mistakes, to the Child, He, the Tireless One, the All-

Powerful, the All-Wise, the All-Resourceful, assumes it with joy; and your difficulties have seen the beginning of the end.³¹

We can see a powerful influence from this kind of New Thought teaching on Bill Wilson's description of God in the Big Book. At first, Bill said, he was willing to accept the idea of a God who was "Creative Intelligence, Universal Mind or Spirit of Nature," as long as this was construed in such a way that human beings would still be allowed the freedom to think for themselves and come up with their own creative ideas. But he could never accept the idea, he said, of some kind of authoritarian, all-controlling "Czar of the Heavens," even if the theologians argued that God was running everything and denying us any real freedom out of his love for us. In fact, Bill eventually discovered that we human beings had to retain the power to ask questions and raise new issues and think for ourselves at all times, because this was a necessary part of our creativity—if we were not being creative and innovative, we were not imitating the Creator God successfully. But we also had to acknowledge that a true Higher Power existed, a cosmic power of creativity and truth, because that was where we had to go to receive real power and direction. That was the key thing he discovered he had to do in order to begin his new spiritual life, as Bill W. explained in the Second and Third Steps: allow God back into his life. But "as soon as we admitted the possible existence of a Creative Intelligence, a Spirit of the Universe underlying the totality of things, we began to be possessed of a new sense of power and direction."³²

Atheists fell into their self-defeating mindset, Bill Wilson said, because they refused to acknowledge that their freedom and creativity was supposed to be spent working out ever more creative and novel ways of advancing a divine cosmic loving-goodness and beauty, and began regarding their own most selfish desires as a sufficient foundation to build their lives upon: "Instead of regarding ourselves as intelligent agents, spearheads of God's ever advancing Creation, we agnostics and atheists chose to believe that our human intelligence was the last word, the alpha and the omega, the beginning and end of all."³³

We already knew who God was, Bill Wilson said. We already knew that we had this divine power within ourselves to devise creative new ways of thinking which would be able to break through the denials and false beliefs of the past. We already knew that when we used this power to change the way we thought about the world, that the world around us would change in response, and that miraculous changes could be made in our own lives and in what was going on in the world around us. “Deep down in every man, woman, and child, is the fundamental idea of God,” Bill W. said. “It may be obscured by calamity, by pomp, by worship of other things, but in some form or other it is there. For faith in a Power greater than ourselves, and miraculous demonstrations of that power in human lives, are facts as old as man himself.”³⁴

Now this life-changing power was only there in its fullness, when we stopped trying to deny the fact that it was God’s creative energy which we were channeling when we ourselves attempted to be creative too. The faith which saved was simply the intuitive, immediate awareness of the divine cosmic energy of love, goodness, novelty, and the desire to know the truth, which kept flowing into us continually as long as we are willing to accept God as our friend instead of our foe. We could sense it in the same way that we could sense the love of a good friend who had just walked into the room at a time when we were sad or despairing. As Bill W. put it: “We finally saw that faith in some kind of God was a part of our make-up, just as much as the feeling we have for a friend. Sometimes we had to search fearlessly, but He was there. He was as much a fact as we were. We found the Great Reality deep down within us.”³⁵

Now one of Bill Wilson’s basic convictions about God—that a person did not have to begin with a belief in any kind of completely orthodox traditional doctrine of God and Christ in order to be saved—could well have come in part from Oxford Group leader Dr. Sam Shoemaker. The latter stated in numerous ways that a person could start his spiritual journey by giving “as much of himself as he can, to as much of Christ as he understands.”³⁶ But the specific

concept of God which Bill recommended was based on Emmet Fox and New Thought, not on Oxford Group ideas.

Now it should also be said that Bill Wilson did not appear to have necessarily accepted everything that he found in Emmet Fox. For example, in Fox's *Power Through Constructive Thinking*, there was a major section on the doctrine of reincarnation.³⁷ The doctrine of transmigration and reincarnation, Fox said, explained why some babies were born deformed or blind, and why some were born into successful and well-to-do families while others were born into rags, poverty, and even the chains of slavery. It explained why some people were born into families with good and loving parents while others were born into dysfunctional families where they suffered continuous physical, sexual, and psychological abuse. It explained why some babies died just a few days or weeks after they were born, and had no chance at any kind of real life. The way we think not only has powerful consequences in this life, Fox said, but will also affect many future lives that we will lead. If I am thinking in this present life about myself and the world in ways that are bringing continual pain and suffering down upon me, and I die without ever having changed the way I think, the next life I will be born into will obviously be filled, from the beginning, with the same kind of pain and suffering.³⁸

But although Bill (and some of the other early AA's, including his wife Lois and Dr. Bob and Anne Smith) believed that they had spoken with the spirits of the dead by going into trances, using ouija boards, and other means,³⁹ there seems no unarguable evidence that Bill upheld any kind of doctrine of reincarnation. So even though a doctrine of reincarnation would provide an explanation for certain kinds of pain and suffering in this life, Bill Wilson probably did not attempt to use that device.⁴⁰

Now the way that Alcoholics Anonymous eventually incorporated Emmet Fox's ideas into its everyday teaching, was to refuse to absolutize it. Or this is what I have observed in practice. When a newcomer starts complaining about how some other person did such-and-such a bad thing to him (or her), an AA oldtimer is

apt to snap back instantly, “And what was your contribution?” Submarine Bill C. was sometimes a bit kinder, and would simply ask sternly, “And have you been keeping your own side of the street swept clean?” Over and over, when AA people are talking about themselves, one can hear them saying, “I always have to remember that the real problem is usually not in the outside world, but inside my own head.”

In other words, a good deal of the time—perhaps even most of the time—AA people have found that the New Thought people are correct in pointing out the way my own attitudes and beliefs end up shaping what the world around me is going to be like. If I approach all human relationships with suspicion and pent-up anger-waiting-to-explode, expecting the other person to attack me or cheat me, I will eventually find myself surrounded by people most of whom are looking for an opportunity to attack me or cheat me. If I fall ill and lose my will to live, and simply lie there expecting to die, the longer I lie there thinking that way, the greater the chances become that I will in fact die.

But in present day AA practice, in my observation, this is never absolutized in the way that Emmet Fox so often did it. People who have never done any harm to anybody sometimes become the victims of other people’s wickedness: say the little children in an elementary school who are killed by a madman with a gun who storms into their school shooting at random everywhere he goes. Good hardworking and dependable people sometimes lose their jobs for reasons that are no fault of their own. People of deep faith can also get cancer and die, or be crippled by degenerative disc disease or multiple sclerosis, or find themselves sitting in AA meetings during their old age (like one of the greatest among my own spiritual teachers) drooling continually from Parkinson’s disease—and bravely rising above their own false pride and ego, and accepting the humiliation, and continuing to go to their AA meetings anyway. Another AA oldtimer, racked with enormous pain from rheumatoid arthritis, and filled with constant sorrow about the way his wife’s life was going—she was hideously depressed, and her anti-depressive

medication was no longer working properly—once said to me simply, “I’m learning to live life on life’s terms.”

As we can see, modern day AA is shaped to the core by teachings drawn from Emmet Fox and the New Thought tradition, but it refuses to say that *all* human problems can be *completely cured* by simply thinking positive thoughts. It is too easy nowadays to find people who have been sober (or drug-free or attending Al-Anon meetings or whatever) for twenty or thirty years or more, so that we simply know far more than anyone did back in December 1940 about the things that can go wrong in human lives even when they are leading exemplary spiritual lives.

NOTES

¹ See also Mel B., *New Wine*, p. 105. Mel, who attends Unity Church and is a devout believer in the power of New Thought spirituality, is one of the two or three most important AA thinkers from the second generation (he and Ernest Kurtz represented two different sides of the AA movement during that period, Mel's the more intuitive side and Ernie's the more intellectual).

² Emmet Fox, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Key to Success in Life* and *The Lord's Prayer: An Interpretation* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1938; orig. pub. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1934). Emmet Fox, *Power Through Constructive Thinking* (New York: Harper & Brothers, published 1940; the individual articles which make up the volume were copyrighted from 1932 to 1940).

³ Available online as AAHistoryLovers message 1705 from Nancy Olson (Mar 13, 2004). Bill W. spoke of receiving a copy of Jim's historical narrative in a letter he wrote back to Jim on December 11, 1947, so the account was necessarily written before that date.

⁴ Mel B., commentary on Emmet Fox's "Making Your Life Worthwhile," available online at <http://hindsfoot.org/fox1.html>. See also Mel B., *New Wine: The Spiritual Roots of the Twelve Step Miracle* (Center City, Minnesota: Hazelden, 1991) 105.

⁵ Doug B. (Riverside, California), AAHistoryLovers message 4003 (January 7, 2007), "Re: Emmet Fox's secretary and Al S."

⁶ Igor I. Sikorsky, Jr., *AA's Godparents: Carl Jung, Emmet Fox, Jack Alexander* (Minneapolis: CompCare Publishers, 1990) 23, as cited in Mel Barger, AAHistoryLovers message 4001 (January 5, 2007), "Emmet Fox's secretary and Al Steckman (correct spelling)."

⁷ *Dr. Bob and the Good Oldtimers* 310.

⁸ Mel B., *New Wine*, p. 105.

⁹ William (Barefoot Bill) Lash, AAHistoryLovers message 1881 (Jun 22, 2004).

¹⁰ Mel B., AAHistoryLovers message 1861 (June 15, 2004).

¹¹ Harold A. “Al” Steckman (December 9, 1903-February 1978), worked in advertising and film, came into AA in March 1944. Al Steckman, *Bert D.: Hardhat, Inebriate, Scholar* (Memphis: Harbor House, 1976). See Jared Lobdell, AAHistoryLovers message 7249 (March 19, 2011) and 6761 (Jul 29, 2010); and Arthur Sheehan, AAHistoryLovers message 2485 (June 12, 2005). His sobriety date of 1944 also given in Timelines in AA’s History at <http://silkworth.net/timelines/timelines.html>. See also Nell Wing, *Grateful to Have Been There*, 1st ed., page 87. The Declaration of Unity which was recited in Miami in 1970 was “This we owe to A.A.’s future; to place our common welfare first; to keep our fellowship united. For on A.A. unity depend our lives and the lives of those to come,” see AAHistoryLovers message 278 (June 11, 2002).

¹² Arthur Sheehan, AAHistoryLovers message 2485 (June 12, 2005).

¹³ See under Al S. in the AA People section at <http://www.barefootsworld.net/aapeople.html>.

¹⁴ Arthur S. (Arlington, Texas), Tom E. (Wappingers Falls, New York), and Glenn C. (South Bend, Indiana), *Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) Recovery Outcome Rates: Contemporary Myth and Misinterpretation* (October 11, 2008), page 30. Available online at <http://hindsfoot.org/recout01.pdf>

¹⁵ For a copy of the pamphlet see <http://hindsfoot.org/akrman1.html> and <http://hindsfoot.org/akrman2.html>. The first surviving edition of the *Akron Manual* came out circa June 1942, see Glenn Chesnut, AAHistoryLovers message 7516 (July 26, 2011). The cover of the pamphlet talks about members with five, six and seven years of sobriety and on page 15 it states that the Akron Group has been in existence for seven years. Dr. Bob and Bill Dotson both got sober in June 1935, which meant that they would have had seven years of sobriety in June of 1942, and the Akron Group would likewise have been in existence for seven years in June 1942.

¹⁶ The first Beginners Meeting in Detroit was conducted by the North-West Group at 10216 Plymouth Road on Monday night, June 14, 1943. The pamphlet is available online at <http://hindsfoot.org/detr0.html>.

¹⁷ The version in the Detroit pamphlet can be read online at <http://hindsfoot.org/detr4.html>.

¹⁸ Fox, *Sermon on the Mount* 13.

¹⁹ Fox, *Sermon on the Mount* 24-25.

²⁰ Fox, *Sermon on the Mount* 8.

²¹ Fox, *Sermon on the Mount* 10.

²² Fox, *Sermon on the Mount* 21, 37, 44-45, and 50-51.

²³ Fox, *Sermon on the Mount* 22.

²⁴ Fox, *Sermon on the Mount* 35, 109; Fox, *Constructive Thinking* 165.

Glenn F. Chesnut, *God and Spirituality: Philosophical Essays*, Hindsfoot Foundation Series on Spirituality and Theology (New York: iUniverse, 2010), see Ch. 14 (pp. 258-281) on “The Three Primal Hypostases,” especially the second hypostasis, which I here termed the *Logos*, but is the same as *Nous* or *Intellectus*.

²⁵ Fox, *Constructive Thinking* 3, 165, 136, 166. Chesnut, *God and Spirituality*, see Ch. 13 (pp. 238-257) on the new dynamic concept of God found in the Boston Personalist philosophers and the philosophers Rudolf Herman Lotze, Alfred North Whitehead, and Charles Hartshorne; and Ch. 14 (pp. 258-281) on “The Three Primal Hypostases,” especially the *Energetikos* (the third hypostasis). The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle famously talked about what he called the “four causes,” using the example of a carpenter building a bed. In Aristotelian terminology, medieval Christian philosophers and theologians were mainly concerned with the “final cause” or “teleological explanation,” that is, the goal the carpenter had when he decided to build the bed. Modern science confines itself instead to investigating the “efficient cause” or “moving cause,” which in this case is the carpenter, who supplies the source of energy and furnishes the agency through which the bed is built. (The material cause is the wood out of which the bed is constructed, and the formal cause is the idea or plan for what the bed should be which the carpenter had in his head before he began building.)

²⁶ Fox, in his commentary on the Lord’s Prayer in *The Sermon on the Mount* 129 and *Power Through Constructive Thinking* 165.

²⁷ Fox, *Constructive Thinking* 2.

²⁸ Étienne Gilson, *The Elements of Christian Philosophy* (New York: New American Library, 1960), 208. The great Catholic scholar Étienne Gilson (1884-1978), after teaching the history of medieval philosophy at

the University of Paris from 1921 to 1932, set up the Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies in Toronto, where he was Director of Studies, in addition to serving as a member of the Pontifical Academy of Saint Thomas Aquinas in Rome.

²⁹ Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1957). Compare this with St. Augustine's doctrine of illuminationism and his concept of God as Truth Itself, that is, God as the divine power to break through our denial structure and strip off all our alibis and excuses and fraudulent attempts at self-justification, and reveal to us the truth about who were truly were.

³⁰ Fox, *Constructive Thinking* 3.

³¹ Fox, *Constructive Thinking* 4-5.

³² *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 4th ed. (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 2001; orig. pub. 1939) 12, 46.

³³ *Alcoholics Anonymous* 49.

³⁴ *Alcoholics Anonymous* 55.

³⁵ *Alcoholics Anonymous* 55.

³⁶ See Dick B. at <http://www.dickb.com/aaarticles/AA-Story.shtml>, who cites Dr. Sam Shoemaker, *Extraordinary Living for Ordinary Men*, p. 76; also Shoemaker's *Children of the Second Birth*, pp. 25 and 47 and *How to Find God*, p. 1. Dick B. also cites Oxford Group author Stephen Foot, *Life Began Yesterday*, pp. 12-13 (cf. 175), "Life began for me with a surrender of all that I know of self to all that I knew of God."

³⁷ Fox, *Constructive Thinking*, see both the chapters on "Life After Death" (pp. 195-223) and "Reincarnation" (pp. 227-256).

³⁸ Fox, *Constructive Thinking* 227-229.

³⁹ *Pass It On* 276-280

⁴⁰ Lois Wilson came from a Swedenborgian background, and Emanuel Swedenborg had certainly believed that he had been in regular contact with the spirits of the dead, but the idea that we had valid memories of past lives or that our souls would be reincarnated into other lives here on earth were not part of Swedenborgian belief. Swedenborg's basic position on the

immortality of the soul seems to have been similar to orthodox Catholic belief. He held that human souls were immortal in the sense that they survived death and would continue to live for all times to come. But based on my reading of Swedenborgian sources, he also seems to have believed that souls, when they appeared, were created out of nothing, and had not always existed from infinite times past.

The one piece of counterevidence I have found comes from the wording of parts of the prayer which Bill and Lois recited together every morning, see *Pass It On* 265: “Oh Lord, we thank Thee that Thou art, that we are from everlasting to everlasting Oh Lord ... Thou art everlasting love. Accordingly, Thou has fashioned for us a destiny passing through Thy many mansions, ever in more discovery of Thee and in no separation between ourselves.” The line that says “we are from everlasting to everlasting” seems to be saying that our souls have always existed from infinite times past, going back to long before their incarnation in this present life. And the line that talks about “passing through Thy many mansions, ever in more discovery of Thee” seems as though it could be speaking, if not of reincarnation into additional lives on this earth, at least of an eternal spiritual journey in the world to come, through ever new dimensions and spheres of existence. But that would also be a doctrine of reincarnation or transmigration of souls, even if each of our souls got only one opportunity to live in a material body in this present universe.