

AAWS reports that 150,000 people every year are still being sentenced to AA every year. Attorney Sheri Sandecki, in an article on The Fix¹ is cited as saying, with regards to First Amendment issues and AA, "she's only witnessed this type of protest once or twice in her nearly 20-year law career, and that most "courts can sidestep around [the First Amendment issue] with a justification of why [the court-mandated AA] is lawful."" It would seem that the "spiritual not religious" argument is still winning for AA. Atheists and religionists alike are being told to just ignore the word God, they can use any Higher Power. How can this argument be successfully revealed as the fallacy it really is?

- 1) Although Bill Wilson claims, in the Big Book, the 12-steps are a "suggested" program of recovery, he makes equally clear that failing to engage them is the product of either willful belligerence or some fundamental incapacity of a person's constitution. Bill Wilson further warned that failure to engage the program will lead alcoholics to jails, institutions and death. Bill's idea that the 12-steps are a "suggestion" closely mirrors a remark an AA member once made to me. He said, "Yeah, the 12-steps are 'suggested', but, they are 'suggested' like it is 'suggested' you pull your rip cord when you jump from a plane." Bill Wilson's words have clearly reached his adherents. They know good and well he uses the word "suggestion", with regard to employing the 12-steps, in understatement.
- 2) Step 3 in the 12-steps directs that one turn their will and lives over to God as God is understood by the person engaging the steps. Atheists are being told to simply ignore the word God and substitute Higher Power. This Higher Power, according to AA-think can be any concept of a force that is capable of affecting life changing emotional experiences and that is larger than the magnitude of one's own internal capability to do so. This the only position from which AA can effectively divorce the concept of "spiritual" from that of "religious", as those concepts are defined by actual usage among people.

Following this logic, let's say I am an atheist sentenced to AA and have come to conclusion that if I could just effect a deep level of peace in my life I would have the emotional basis from which to stop drinking. I decide my experiences in the presence of the ocean in the past have made me feel peaceful so I choose the ocean as my Higher Power. I spend a lot of time at the ocean, soaking up the sensory experiences thereof, and they do, indeed, provoke a life-changing emotional experience of peace. From there I no longer feel a need to drink. All well and good. But, according to the Step 3, one must turn their will and their life over to their Higher Power. In order for a Higher Power to direct someone's will and life, it must be capable of actually making decisions as to what activities that person's will and life should engage. The ocean is incapable of doing this. The life-changing emotional experiences, such as peace, that may be affected by the ocean may give me emotional space to come up with my own ideas as to how to direct my will and life. However, this type of activity would fail the Step 3 mandate. My will and my life would still be in my own hands. In order to succeed on Step 3, my life-changing emotional experiences, induced by the presence of the ocean, would have to be from some intelligent being using the ocean as a conduit to communicate with me. In this case, the ocean itself is not my Higher Power. Yet again, the ocean as a higher power fails on step 3.

The only two paradigms in which a person could truly turn over their will and lives to something capable of deciding what that person should do with their lives, are worship of a deity or consenting oneself to some form of slavery. This being the case, AA now has to admit that the only defensible position for their idea that they are "spiritual not religious" is no longer defensible at all. AA doesn't espouse to the world that they are "spiritual not advocates of slavery". AA says they are "spiritual not religious". It is the religious concept that AA wishes

to divorce itself from.

There is a clear dictate within AA to follow the program of the 12-steps, including step 3. Step 3 unequivocally requires adherence to the concept of a deity capable of deciding how one should direct their activities and behavior in life. This requirement is repugnant to the atheist as well as to many religionists. Let's look at just three examples. Buddhists advocate the Middle Way which dismisses the idea of surrendering one's will to anyone, even a deity. Instead, Buddhists pursue successful negotiation of inter-dependence. This leaves one's will and direction of their life firmly in their own hands. Secular Humanism, argued by some to be a religion, positively deplores the idea of abdicating their right to make autonomous decisions. Even many with Christian-rooted beliefs advocate self-determination. Indeed there were many such adherents among the framers of the Constitution, a document birthed in the right to self-determination. This attitude remains firm in the hearts of many Christian-based religionists even today.

The purpose of the establishment clause in the US Constitution is to prohibit the government from participating in the establishment of any religion so that people have full freedom to establish their own religious beliefs. US Court cases have made clear this freedom includes the freedom to have no religious belief at all. When a US court, a part of the Judicial Branch of the government, sentences a person to AA, they are sentencing that person to participate in a religion and thereby participating in the establishment of that religion. This clearly stands to force upon people religious beliefs that violate their own. There have been eight higher court rulings supporting the idea that judicial sentencing of a person to AA violates the rule of law as set forth in the US Constitution. Yet even years after these rulings people are still being sentenced to AA. Apparently, some courts in the US are still being duped by AA's flim flam over the idea that they are "spiritual not religious". Acceptance of this idea appears to be the way around Constitutional law in the eyes of AA supporters.

This paper has clearly demonstrated that AA's claim to being a "spiritual not religious" program positively fails on Step 3. AA is a religion. When courts sentence someone to AA, are they sentencing someone merely to sit in AA rooms or are they sentencing someone to participate in the AA program? Does this distinction matter? I have to confess that I don't know of any court that has actually required that someone work the 12-step indoctrination into the AA religion. However, the judiciary cannot get themselves off the hook of violating someone's Constitutional rights with the idea that no one is forced to work the 12-steps when they are sentenced. When people enter AA, they are unavoidably subjected to Bill Wilson's brutally coercive reasoning for being indoctrinated into his AA religion. This happens through introduction to the Big Book and at the hands of AA adherents in the rooms. Further, sentencing someone to merely be "exposed" to the AA belief system would constitute an attempt to establish the religion. There would be no reason for anyone to desire that a person have exposure to a religious belief system outside of the hope that such exposure will facilitate the adoption of the belief. I dare say the judiciary would be remiss to sentence someone to the Catholic Church for alcoholism even if the only requirement was for the alcoholic was to just have exposure to Catholicism in an attempt to fix their alcoholism.

When courts accept the idea that AA is "spiritual not religious" as a reason to sidestep the Constitution, they merely participate in an AA bait-and-switch technique to indoctrinate people into AA's religious belief system. One may be able to begin the AA religious indoctrination process with any concept of a Higher Power but once one begins to work Step 3, there is a clear necessity that one's Higher Power transition to a deity. This is a process that closely mirrors own testimony as to how he found God. It is not surprising that he built the 12-steps to mirror his own process of finding God and giving his will and his life over to Him.

¹<http://www.thefix.com/content/court-forced-12-step?page=all>