



Did you hear the one about the six nonbelievers that walked into an A.A. room?

By Joe C.



Deep in bible belt-tightening USA, an eye-opening study comes from University of Tennessee (UTC). Christopher F. Silver and Thomas J. Coleman III discovered that people without a higher power worldview fall into six types, based on the analysis from 59 interviews across the country. “We’re pretty sure we’ve spotted all six in our comments section,” says lead researcher, Christopher Silver.

Among believers in 12 Step fellowships we recognize a range—from theistic literalists to doorknob devotees and everything in between. So why limit the many colors of nonbelievers? From the analysis of their data, UTC comes up with six categories:

Type 1) **Intellectual atheist/agnostic:** Well read, eager to engage in debate or any social intercourse that will stimulate them intellectually. The debate is seen as sporting.

Type 2) **Activist atheist:** This unbeliever isn’t content with just disbelieving in God; they speak to the dangers of theism and the religions that preach theistic dogma. Politically engaged, the activists bring their brand of scientific realism to causes from minority rights to the environment.

Type 3) **Seeker-agnostic:** “I don’t know and can’t know—and neither can you.” Divinity, if it

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“Rebellion dogs our every step at first.” *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* p. 73

exists, is beyond human understanding and these seekers, although searching, are skeptical that any of the book-based messages from God are anything other than political/cultural, man-made fiction. Doubt is a greater state of enlightenment than certainty. Type 3s don't see themselves as undecided, rather, they are firmly committed to middle ground.

Type 4) **Anti-theist**: Being diametrically opposed to religious ideology, anti-theists denounce the promulgating of ignorance and delusion. This group feels that theirs is the more enlightened and superior worldview; superstition is socially detrimental. Confronting belief and opposing religion is a duty.

Type 5) **Non-theist**: This group is apathetic. Rarely giving the matter any thought, this smallish group wouldn't care about the debate on Divinity any more than someone from New York would care about what day of the week that trash was collected in Beijing. Non-theists neither feel part of a team, a cause nor find worldview debates to be useful or entertaining.

Type 6) **Ritual agnostic/atheist**: "Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater," would be a theme for this nonbeliever who still finds cultural connection to their religion of birth or worthy philosophy from religions as a whole. Secular Jews, Baptists, Muslims or Hindus might not worship Gods, Allah or Shiva or believe in the afterlife. However, they feel a connection to the community that religious tradition offer. Even a priest could be an atheist but fulfill his role in a community of adherents. Some who check off, "Protestant," in a survey might not believe the Jesus or virgin birth myth but they identify with their cultural background.

More will be revealed. UTC psychology department fully expect there to be 50 shades of skepticism as more attention is spent on our growing demographic. Silver says, "One of the main purposes of this study is to start a conversation and raise awareness of the diversity of the nonbelief community. Tommy and I both accept that there are other academic researchers out there with far more psychometric and methodological sophistication. Certainly these researchers may be able to explore the community in greater detail, shedding light on aspects of the community not detected in this study. We welcome others to explore the diversity of nonbelief and share their data and conclusions."

The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life in Americaⁱ separated their respondents as claiming to be a member of a named Christian or other religion and if they didn't fit in one these numerous categories, there was "atheist," "agnostic" or "none" left to choose from. Silver and Coleman try to expand on who this growing category of nonbelievers really is.

The A.A. Pamphlet "Do You Think You're Different?"ⁱⁱ was crafted by Living Sober author Barry L in or around 1976. In that pamphlet that relates the stories of A.A. minorities, one agnostic and one atheist tell their story along with the GLBT, visible minorities, a teen, a senior citizen, a high and a low bottom drunk, a celebrity and member of the clergy.

Let's look at how the UTC categories might present inside our A.A. fellowship:

Type 1, the intellectual atheist will know our history, from Jim Burwell to the official endorsement that the first Buddhist AA groups to re-write a God-free version of the Steps from

the Steps author, Bill W., to how many agnostic groups are found in the world directory and where to find and quote Warranty Six in Concept XII of the A.A. Service Manual:

“Much attention has been drawn to the extraordinary liberties which the A.A. Traditions accord to the individual member and his (or her) group; no penalties to be inflicted for nonconformity to A.A. principles; no fees or dues to be levied—voluntary contributions only; no member to be expelled from A.A.—membership always to be the choice of the individual; each A.A. group to conduct its internal affairs as it wishes—it being merely required to abstain from acts that might injure A.A. as a whole; and finally, that any group of alcoholics gathered together for sobriety may call themselves an A.A. group provided that, as a group, they have no other purpose or affiliation.”

Type 1 wouldn't shun or discourage theistic devotion. However, she or he would prefer lively debate over everyone keeping to themselves regarding worldview issues.

The Activist Atheist, Type 2, would remind others in meetings that belief in a sobriety-granting deity is optional—not mandatory. Type 2, as they engage in service work, will take stock of some of the other more dogmatic tenets in A.A. They may prefer a more up-to-date A.A. Instead of sacralizing the first 164 pages of the Big Book, how about a less dated, sexist, American-centric Big Book? “If it works don't fix it,” should be weighed against, “how could we alter or improve literature to be more current and helpful?” The secret healing power is in the idea behind the message, not in the carefully preserved words. As the founders wrote, (Alcoholics Anonymous, p. 63) *“The wording was, of course, quite optional so long as we expressed the idea, voicing it without reservation.”*

From the disease model made popular in modern day AA to the original allergy metaphor put forward by Dr. Silkworth, why make anything sacred? If the Big Book has “The Religious View of A.A.” as Appendix V, in this day and age, we are remiss to omit a Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, Taoists, and Sikh view on A.A. How about retiring “To Wives” and replacing it with “To Love Ones?” How about “We Agnostics” being written *by* agnostics, not *for* agnostics? The A.A. world of 2013 is bigger than New York and Ohio A.A. of 1939. Once we learned the world wasn't flat anymore, what was the point in stubbornly clinging to tradition?

Type 3, the seeking agnostic might get more heat from nonbelievers in the rooms than the more religious members. While A.A. believers will *knowingly* wait for the seeker to come to believe, committed skeptics may be more impatient, “Stop fence-sitting! ‘Half measures avail us nothing.’ How could you still think an interfering/intervening deity is possibly keeping you sober? There's no Zeus, no Santa, no Unicorn, no God; get over it and move on.”

The seeker may even feel their doubt is a higher spiritual plane than the certainty of either their atheist or theist sisters or brothers. Binary thinking demands that either the world is this way or that way (everything is a one or a zero). The seeker isn't a binary thinker; their worldview isn't rigid and doesn't need absolutes to get on with the business of sober living.

Type 4, the anti-theist will quote Jim Burwell, “I can't stand this God stuff! It's a lot of malarkey for weak folks. The group doesn't need it and I won't have it.” Type 4 will always be ready in a

meeting to counter someone's proselytizing passive-aggressiveness with a direct assault. A thesis may smugly suggest, "When you're ready to stop drinking, you'll find God." Anti-theists may feel like the meeting's monitor and cross talks with, "Keep an open mind' goes both ways, you know. What works for you isn't a universal formula for one and all. Live and let live."

The most dogmatic of us nonbelievers would be the anti-theist. Many type 4s won't stay. They really think AA would be better off without the God talk because atheists are superior. Many will migrate to SMART recovery SOS or another secular peer-to-peer fellowship where they will be in the company of only like-minded folks.

Tommy Coleman told me, "The Anti-theist is probably more likely to be a recent apostate, de-convert etc. from a religious tradition." So in A.A. terms, the anti-theist may be one of us who just recently let go of God—having bought into the "God of our understanding" model, some of us later find the light goes out on our faith in the unseen. "There are none so righteous as the recently converted," can apply to A.A. apostates who once went along with the crowd but later dismiss such beliefs as an unfounded and unnecessary crutch.

Type 5, Non-theists are at risk of drifting away from the rooms, too. Constant talk about God or constant belittling of god-consciousness, are both really boring to Type 5. If everyone is so sure of what they believe why don't they just shut up and get on with it? All the description of how God is working in each of our lives is really boring to a non-theist.

There is so much more about recovery to talk about—why focus on what we *believe* when the material world inspires all the awe and wonder we need? One day at a time, don't pick up the first drink, stick with the winners, personal inventory, making amends, meditation—these are things the non-theist will be heard talking about. These secular subjects are real, concrete and what living sober is about.

Non-theists find their way into service work. The Twelve Traditions only talk of God once and the Concepts are secular tenets. Working on conferences, public information or getting involved in General Service is where you might find some of us type 5s. There is a lot less debate about God at an Area Assembly than there is in a Step discussion meeting.

Type 6 12-Steppers, the ritualistic atheist or agnostic, enjoy the camaraderie of being part of something. The ritualistic adherent is caught up in the *doing* of A.A. more than the *believing*. Higher power, "God as we understand Him," praying to doorknobs, or G.O.D. acronyms are no big deal to nonbelievers in of the 6th type. The *esprit du corps* felt in the rooms is powerful enough to keep us sober and we aren't offended with anyone's banter about belief or lack thereof. We go along to get along if we are a type 6. The ritualistic atheist might even be heard saying the Serenity Prayer or telling us how they turned their life over to God, not because that's what they believe—but because that's the language we speak in A.A.

Ritualistic atheists might be closet-atheist but they want to fit in—not take a stand. If it's all bull shit, what does it matter saying "God could and would if He were sought?" Who knows how many of our 12 Step member are closet atheists see the fellowship as a popularity contest. If you want to speak at conferences, chair meetings and get elected to service positions, you better say

what other people like to hear. “What about rigorous honesty,” you ask? “Except when to do so would injure them or others,” is our response. Why make waves?



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So, reader, have you found your *type* or are you terminally unique. Some of us evolve from one type to another.

Tommy Coleman told Rebellion Dogs, “Now in terms of individuals looking to find out which type they are, we say that due to the nature of all typologies, you may see yourself in more than one. However, we ask that you pick what describes you best as most people usually have one type that fits them better than the rest.”

Personally, I was a closet-atheist 6 for years of my sobriety. I was hiding out in plain view A.A. It was easier for me to talk like everyone else than it was to be confronted. I even thought on a certain level that if I faked it, I would make it. When I felt the need for more integral sobriety, I came out of the closet. I was an apologetic atheist at first, but anti-theism was just too tempting in my *recently converted* phase. Suddenly, after decades of going along with the crowd, I was now offended by the blatant and sometimes bullying pro-theism or big-book-thumping.

Today I identify as a type 1 nonbeliever, although I empathies with every edge of the nonbeliever’s hexagon. Maybe one day I will be non-theist # 5 and grow bored of the whole discussion but right now, I find the debate irresistible.

The study made me think that there is no universal “us” voice,” and it isn’t being countered by a universal “them” voice. None of us can speak for all of us and I for one will tread more carefully when I am tempted to start a sentence with “What makes more sense for nonbelievers is ...” or, “The difference between believers and nonbelievers is ...” This UTC study is a reminder to me today to not be presumptuous about the preferences or values of others. We have the voice of the Pharisee and the Recalcitrant on both sides of the God question. The Twelve Traditions accommodates a 12 Step coat of many colors. The challenge for me is not to see it as a black and white coat.

Comment or follow along the UTC ongoing study at Facebook:
<https://www.facebook.com/atheismresearch> or from their website:
<http://www.atheismresearch.com/>

ⁱ <http://www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/>

ⁱⁱ http://www.aa.org/pdf/products/p-13_doyouthinkyourediff.pdf