



January 2015 - Pluralism: The language barrier to getting along

Worldviews that divide us in politics, religion and recover & the hope for reconciliation.

#JeSuisCharlie is the hash tag that tells the world that you condemn violence in the name of creed; Vive la freedom of the press! An antagonistic French atheist newspaper was terrorized by angry Muslims in retaliation for insensitive depictions of Islamic religious symbols. Let's not forget that most Muslims condemn violence, too, but they're hardly pro-blasphemy either. How does one avoid knee-jerk reactions to news stories like these? We can see people take sides, sometimes before all the facts are in.



Credited to John Buchan (1875 - 1940), novelist, politician.

I am pro-pluralism and at times like this I wonder if *everyone getting along respectfully* isn't the delusion of liberal idealism. Still, it's my default position; we can respect each other and not berate our differences. But it's a challenge. I can sound all rational and inclusive... until I get triggered and then I get passive-aggressive or worse.

On January 9th, *The New Yorker* printed "Unmournable Bodes" by Teju Cole. The editorial confronts the question that has to be asked about this news of the world. What if you don't want to promote either terrorism or racism? On one hand you have insensitive journalism that preys on racial/creedal stereotypes and on the other hand, jihad. Both are dehumanizing.

"But it is possible to defend the right to obscene and racist speech without promoting or sponsoring the content of that speech. It is possible to approve of sacrilege without endorsing racism. And it is possible to consider Islamophobia immoral without wishing it illegal. Moments of grief neither rob us of our complexity nor absolve us of the responsibility of making distinctions."

Check out the whole article here:

<http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/unmournable-bodies>

In Twelve Step/Twelve Tradition culture, creed becomes an issue of the relevance/reality of divine intervention in the process of getting and staying clean and sober. It's not our religious or a-religious convictions per se. One can believe in their favorite Holy Book and

still believe that addiction recovery is a self-help process—not a matter of divine inspiration. It comes down to not just outside agency; but we each see the role of outside forces in our recovery outcomes differently. Regardless of having our faith in Yahweh or the power of example of the group, where does our responsibility take over?

The “as we understand God” is a buffet of spiritual folklore. Don’t like a punishing judging god but want to believe there’s a divine plan for you? There’s your god. Want to plug into power but not the word god because of the religious baggage that comes with calling Yahweh by name? Have at it with your higher power. Or do you want the internal locus-of-control model? Tap away at your unsuspecting inner resource. Mix and match as you see fit. Accessorize with a heaven but no hell, reincarnation instead of finitude, your only limit is your imagination. Still, being above it all with an ashes to ashes, rotting flesh back to star-dust atheism has the rush of trading eternity tomorrow for being so intellectually superior to our myth-dependent fellows, today.

From *A.A. Grapevine* May 2010 we have a lesson in taking what we like without bad-mouthing the rest. Actually, this is a “one of these things is not like the other” scenario. Previously, in January 2010 an article “Without a Higher Power” gave an atheist take on recovery in AA. Here are three responses from readers. See if you can pick the one that’s different from the others:

Response to Greg H.’s Without a Higher Power published in Grapevine January 2010.

Ludicrous: I was not pleased with the story “Without a Higher Power: (January 2010). As the Big Book states, we have no defense against that first drink, but we do have “a daily reprieve contingent upon the maintenance of our spiritual condition.” Why would I need a spiritual condition, or maintain it, if it weren’t associated with a power greater than myself? The part about the sponsor saying that what the author was doing was obviously working, so let’s not try to fix it, is absolutely ludicrous. If there is one who is walking in my midst with this limited idea of AA, I will be on the lookout to work with him and hopefully get him back on this road we are trudging of happy destiny. Dale M., Lake Charles, La

Primary Purpose: Although the author’s experience did not match my own, I applaud *Grapevine* for publishing “Without a Higher Power.” In my 22 years in AA, the most common complaint I’ve heard from newcomers who’ve “tried it; didn’t work” was intolerance of AAs towards atheists and agnostics. Hopefully this article will help us remember our primary purpose isn’t evangelical, but to stay sober and help other alcoholics achieve sobriety. Kevin K. Centerpoint, N.Y.

All-encompassing: Thank you for publishing “Without a Higher Power.” In recent years I’ve noticed a kind of thinking among some AAs that I would consider bordering on the “fanatical.”

There is no one way to be a member of AA. The author made a beautiful statement about the all-encompassing arms of our life-saving Fellowship. George P. Hingham, Wis.¹

None of the respondents claim to be atheists. They are all believers and none had a conversion experience from the "Without a Higher Power" article. Two believers thanked *A.A. Grapevine* for publishing the story and took away something themselves or saw how the story could benefit others. The other—Ludicrous—was offended that *A.A. Grapevine* poisoned the magazine with such blasphemy, citing the suggestion of recovery without god as plausible as a dangerous (maybe life-threatening) act of irresponsible journalism. I hope I can be more like Kevin and George and less like one-way-or-the-highway Dale.

I think it's pretty good that two-thirds of the reactions from people with opposing worldviews are respectful of the unbeliever writer and appreciative of his input. That's very hopeful.

Some of you may know that a few months prior, I had an article published called, "Overhaul?" asking if our early 20th century program was fit for the 21st century newcomer. Sure, some reactions were hostile towards the blasphemous idea of tinkering with our sacred text. But most agreed or disagreed with one or more ideas without being disagreeable about me, the quality of my recovery or *A.A. Grapevine*.

It's easy to stop at something like this response and get angry:

Overhaul? (by MARK W.)

In suggesting that atheism or agnosticism are satisfactory in the longer-term, provided one keeps an open mind, the author misses a key purpose of the *Big Book*. As "We Agnostics" clearly states, the book's "main object is to enable you to find a Power greater than yourself," while in "How it Works," we are reminded "there is One who has all power—the One is God," For this alcoholic, only God can effect enough change within me to stay away from the bottle.

Binary thinking is reserved for the religious. Atheism comes with its own dogma as does agnosticism. Dogmatic atheists will pronounce that religion is destructive, waning and breathing its last gasp. We'd all be better without religious mythology and they'll rant about the crusades or pedophiles of the cloth as an example of how religion is bad and we'd all be better without it. Dogmatic agnostics won't even let atheists or theists finish their sentence, interrupting with "It's unknown and unknowable, why are you still talking about this; what's the point?" Debate will frustrate a dogmatic agnostic because unsolvable riddles are an unproductive use of time. "Every rational person would agree with us," would be the rational for any dogmatic theist, atheist or agnostic.

Last week on AAagnostica I suggested that both *Big Book* thumpers and *Big Book* bashers were dogmatic and a member took exception to "bashers" being called dogmatic just because they have the same "it's time for change" ring to their sharing.

I will say this: both a member of a minority or a majority can hold prejudice over the other, but only the majority member can discriminate over the other. A system needs to be in place whereby literature and/or rules frustrate equality. Just as one could have an anti-visible minority prejudice or an anti-Caucasian prejudice, only one is racism in North America. If you think African Americans are superior to whites, that's prejudice but anti-black sentiment has a system of prejudice in place to back it up—making it racism. Stats show that being born black in the USA has a different probability for wealth and education than being born white. This is systemic discrimination at play. This is borne out in gender in the workplace, sexual orientation in high school and yes—being an atheist in AA. Either an atheist or theist can be a bigot but only the theist in AA has the systemic backing to harass and discriminate against the atheist.

So, going back to being called out for calling *Big Book* bashers as being just as dogmatic as *Big Book* thumpers, I stand by what I say—each may feel superior to the other. But, to my critic's point, the basher doesn't have the systemic infrastructure of literature and strength in numbers to harass or discriminate against thumpers (except maybe around the table at a We Agnostics group). In this regard, the basher—the one who wants wholesale changes to the *Alcoholics Anonymous* text—has to be insistent, disobedient and repetitive to disturb the status quo enough to initiate change. While that may or may not be dogmatic, it is an unavoidable position. Mary Sophia Allen (British Suffergette), Malcolm X (Reformist of Islam, Capitalism and Civil Rights) or Madalyn Murray O'Hair (American Atheist) may be people, who if they laid down on a psychiatrist's couch today, might label their negativity, temper, disobedience and hostility as Oppositional Defiance Disorder. Einstein might be in this category too.

It's no surprise that many theists see atheists as angry. In the USA today—in or outside of the rooms—a member with a theistic worldview enjoys a status quo that embraces them while an AA atheist does not. It may be anger that the atheists are displaying. On the other hand it may be lobbying for change.

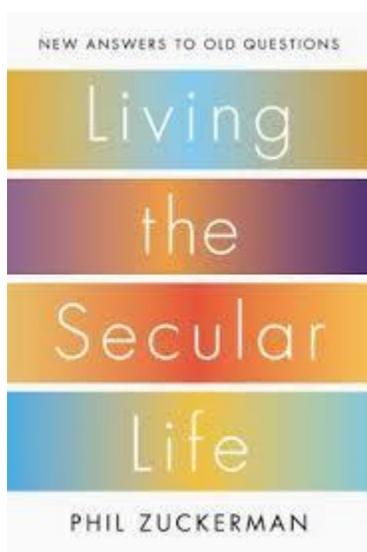
I will use myself as an example. I just wrote a letter to GSO and our latest Area delegate. It was about the current dysfunction of our two Canadian big-city Intergroups that have delisted agnostic groups. There isn't much that our groups can do ourselves; we have no voice on the Intergroup floors. The point of the letter was simply to ensure that no one is too comfortable with the new reality of an *AA of uniformity* replacing our *AA of unity*. While the atheist/agnostic groups are on the wrong side of “going with the flow,” Intergroup is on the wrong side the Human Rights Code in Canada. It's just a matter of time before some frustrated AA nonbeliever files a complaint with the Provincial Human Rights Tribunal and AAs would be trading in their spiritual awakening buzz for a rude awakening zap.

The Tribunal would look at A.A. as a service provider through the Human Rights Code's “duty to accommodate” and the Tribunal would not look at this as a local squabble the way GSO might want to. This isn't complicated legalese. No matter what “a loving God as

He expresses Himself through our group conscience” says about atheist meetings or atheist Steps, the Code ensures that minorities, based on race, sexual orientation, creed, etc. are accommodated. Rules that discriminate are rules that will be struck down by the Commission. You can find this right on the OHRC (Human Rights Commission) website:

“Organizations must ensure that they are not unconsciously engaging in systemic discrimination. This takes vigilance and a willingness to monitor and review numerical data, policies, practices and decision-making processes and organizational culture. It is not acceptable from a human rights perspective for an organization to choose to remain unaware of systemic discrimination or to fail to act when a problem comes to its attention”ⁱⁱⁱ

Readers might see my letter as discontent, argumentative or that I am complaining. I don't think that's fair. I am pointing out an inequity, yes, but I am also trying to alert AA to an always present danger of AA being paraded across the front pages on the newspaper, again, framed as promoting a culture of bigotry.



This is 2015; The World Convention is in Atlanta. I am sure that while all eyes of the world are on AA in Atlanta, GSO doesn't want the press asking about members who are currently being discriminated against in the host city of the 2025 Conference, Vancouver.

So, a minority member can feel just as superior as the majority member that oppresses them. But without systems of support, only one of them can be called “discriminatory.” Let's get back to pluralism *the reality* vs. pluralism *the myth*.

It is easy to get bent out of shape over passive-aggressive suggestions that our atheism is just anger at god or a temporary intellectual holdout, why not look at the warm reception we get from most members, instead of the bigotry of some? There is plenty of both if we look for it.

So, if one focuses on the bad, it's easy to be negative. Phil Zuckerman's *Living the Secular Life* combines personal anecdotes and sociological insights to craft a guide for living without religion. The book seems aimed primarily at the USA, the developed country with the largest per-capita belief in a personal god.

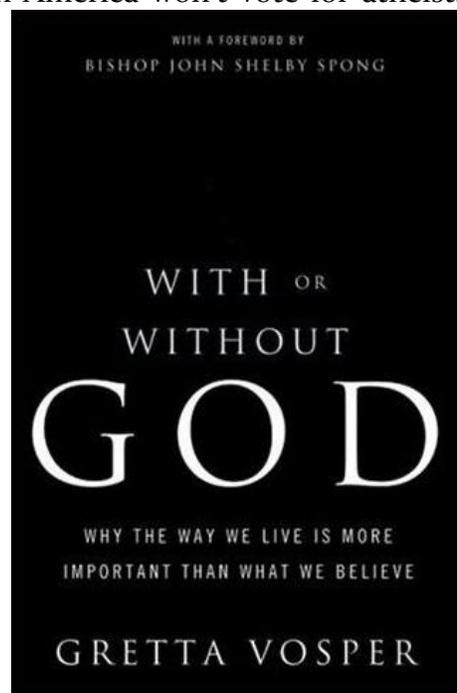
He uses stats that we've reviewed before from the Pew Research Center. Expanding on a *Washington Post* article he wrote called, “Why Do Americans still dislike Atheists?” he looked at people's opinion of atheists compared to Muslims, homosexuals and people of other faith.

“A lot of religious Americans don't like or trust people who don't believe in God because they assume that atheism is the same thing as being without morals. This

assumption is so widely spread that In many surveys atheists come in at the last place when Americans are asked to rank members of certain racial, ethnic, or religious groups as potential spouses for their kids. ... 43% of Americans said that they would not vote for an atheist for president, putting atheist in last/worst place, behind Muslims for president. Homosexuals (30 percent wouldn't), Mormons (18 percent wouldn't) Latinos (7 percent wouldn't), Jews (6 percent wouldn't), Catholic (5 percent wouldn't), Women (5 percent wouldn't) and African Americans (4 percent).”ⁱⁱⁱ

“See,” you say. “Over 10 times the number of people in America won't vote for atheists compared to African Americans or Jews.” True; but almost 60% of American's would consider voting for an atheist. I don't deny this is a great handicap in any political race. Nevertheless, having 57% of votes at least considering you ought not to be discounted. Put in a more positive light, over ½ of American's don't liken atheist to devil-worshippers. Yes, 100% of Americans ought to treat atheists equally, but over half—that is at least a big improvement over how it was 20 years ago and it seems to be continuing to move in the right direction.

If you think being an atheist in AA is an uphill battle in the popularity contest department, try being an atheist minister. Gretta Vosper has two books published since she came out to her congregation and the elders at the United Church of Canada. Gretta is an atheist. She doesn't see throwing out the good deeds with the dogmatic myths as productive. She founded the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity and she continues to lead the West Hill United Church in Toronto's east end.



“I do find it hard to imagine that preserving an institution for preservation's sake itself is anything more than an enormous waste of time and energy. But I do think that the church is well placed to bring about some significant change in the world. And change in the world is desperately needed.”^{iv}

She sees the infrastructure of the Church as flawed and imperfect but still virtuous. From the statement above, she goes on to talk about how many sects and denominations got behind the 2003 United Nations, “International Year of Freshwater. “ She gives other examples. We hear the Catholic Pope today campaigning for positive climate change initiatives and more economic and social equity.

If a church can be a church with or without God, I am sure Twelve Step fellowships can embrace a “with or without God” worldview. Our primary purpose isn't directly

connected to any theology. Our preamble and our Traditions don't defend any particular program of recovery. Instead, they remind us how to get along with each other and in the world around us.

While in the habit of reading *Beyond Belief: Agnostic Musings for 12 Step Life*, Jay in Sedona invited me to host a weekend recovery retreat on the theme of "Beyond Belief." He asked me if I would and I said, "Yes." He asked me who I'd like to work with and without hesitation I said, "John McAndrew." A parish priest for 18 years, John has also worked as both a bereavement and an addictions counselor. I don't want to frame the Twelve Steps as better secular. I want to talk about the bilingualism, biculturalism of the Twelve Steps. How better to do that than to co-host an event with a theologian?

I still have a warm feeling when I think about being invited by the Ontario Regional Conference of A.A. (2012) to speak on the Spiritual Panel (The Concert Hall @ Fairmont Royal York Hotel, pictured); it was the two Joes—Joe R, priest and Joe C, atheist. We both have decades of sobriety; we both stay sober in A.A. If anything, I got out-outrageous-ed by Joe the Catholic priest.



He was awesome; Joe spoke—I was in awe. It was a celebration of pluralism and people continue to share with me their fond memories of how that meeting helped them overcome their own narcissism of small differences. We share the experience of addiction and we share the experience of recovery. The narrative changes from one worldview to another but believing

and belonging are not synonymous.

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ⁱ A.A. Grapevine Inc., May 2010

ⁱⁱ <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/policy-creed-and-accommodation-religious-observances/creed>

ⁱⁱⁱ Zuckerman, Phil, *Living the Secular Life: New Answers to Old Questions*, New York: Penguin Press, 2014 p. 9

^{iv} Vosper, Gretta, *With or Without God*, Toronto: Harper Collins, 2008, p. 284