

“your own concept of god”



is it the god of your own understanding
or the god of your own making?

“When, therefore, we speak to you of God, we mean your own conception of God.”

Alcoholics Anonymous, p. 47

The quote above is from Chapter 4: *We Agnostics*. Bill’s purpose in writing this chapter is to open up the door to agnostics who, he rightly assumes, are going to have trouble with a program of recovery that depends on the power of God to be effective. Some people insist that “your own conception of God” provides the official AA-certified “God.” In truth, the Big Book suggests YOCOG only as a way to begin a process. It is supposed to be the means to an end, not the end itself.

Bill includes himself when he writes “we agnostics.” He reveals that he once was a skeptical, agnostic intellectual and critic of organized religion. His story chronicles many of the apprehensions that agnostic readers have. In broaching the subject of belief in God, Bill relies on the approach he learned from the Rev. Sam Shoemaker and other members of the Oxford Group movement: surrender as much of yourself as you can to as much of God as you understand.¹ That is the barest, most minimal requirement he can describe to get the non-believers in the God door. Bill assures them that “even a willingness to believe in a Power greater than ourselves” will begin to get results, as it has for Bill and other former agnostics, “even though it was impossible for any of us”—agnostics—“to fully define or comprehend that Power.” Note, he does not say “it is impossible,” he says “it was impossible,” with the qualifier “fully.” Also note that he is talking about agnostics in the initial stage of recovery.

AAs who misconstrue this message forget that the “we” here is the voice of the agnostic in the embryonic stage of spiritual development, not AA as a whole. While some AAs may believe that this is the sum total of the faith you need to work the steps, the Big Book characterizes YOCOG as “inadequate,” except for starters: “Our own conception, however inadequate, was sufficient to make the approach and to effect a contact with Him.” (p. 46)

You know how they say you’ve got to crawl before you can walk, and you’ve got to walk before you can run? Working with YOCOG, not having to take into consideration anyone else’s ideas (p. 46), is the crawl part of our spiritual way of life. The intention and the expectation in the Big Book is that our understanding of God will increase beyond our own conception of God. “There I humbly offered myself to God, as I then understood Him, to do with me as He would.” (p. 13) Implicit in this statement of Bill’s (“as I then understood Him”) is that his understanding of God had grown as the result of Ebby Thacher’s visit to his home (pp. 9-12), and has grown since. The turning point was when Bill dropped his prejudice. (p. 12) Prejudice is mentioned seven times in “We Agnostics” as a significant impediment to spiritual development.

Elsewhere, the Big Book is explicit about growing beyond our initial understanding of God. “Afterward, we found ourselves accepting many things which then seemed entirely out of reach. That was growth, but if we wished to grow we had to begin somewhere. So we used our own conception, however limited it was.” (p. 47) “As soon as a man can say that he does believe, or is willing to believe, we emphatically assure him that he is on his way. It has been repeatedly proven among us that upon this simple cornerstone a wonderfully effective spiritual structure can be built.” (p. 47) Doing the steps is supposed to lead to a spiritual awakening, not to maintain a spiritual stagnation. For example, after doing Step 5 it says: “We thank God from the bottom of our heart that *we know Him better.*” (p. 75, my italics) There is even a dire warning of the consequences of not growing spiritually. “All went well for a time, but he failed to enlarge his spiritual life. To his consternation, he found himself drunk half a dozen times in rapid succession.” (p. 35)

Those who maintain that YOCOG is the destination rather than the initiation are ignorant at best; at worst, they mislead and inhibit spiritual growth in others. They sometimes act like the crabs in the bucket that drag back any other crab that tries to climb out. They demand that everyone stay on their level—the crawl stage. They sound like the people Bill describes on pp. 47-48: “... handicapped by obstinacy, sensitiveness, and unreasoning prejudice ... so touchy that even casual reference to spiritual things made us bristle with antagonism.”

They have a habit of “protecting” newcomers from any talk of God, even though the Big Book unequivocally directs us to “stress the spiritual feature freely” (p. 93) when talking to a newcomer. They take it upon themselves to be the gatekeepers of God-talk in any meeting, engaging in not so subtle cross talk and “correcting” those who say anything on this subject that goes beyond what they deem appropriate. Anyone who’s been around AA long enough knows exactly what I’m talking about.

It should not be a familiar quip in AA to say something like, “Hey, who the hell can say they know anything about God? Nobody knows. If I could explain God, it wouldn’t be God. My God is the God I don’t understand.” That is specious² and all too popular in AA. It passes for a kind of Will Rogers, humble and homespun edition of God according to AA wisdom. You will not find it in the Big Book.

First of all, when you say, “If I could explain God, it wouldn’t be God”, you *have* offered an explanation of God. Your explanation of God is that God can’t be explained. Secondly, no one claims to be able to completely and comprehensively explain God. That’s a Straw Man argument that the Know Nothing faction likes to throw up. “Well, some people may claim to know all there is to know about God. I guess that’s fine for them, but—now I’m just talking for this alcoholic—I don’t know **** about God.” Guaranteed laughs with this line of talk. Also, it shames the person who just spoke about their growing understanding of God in their lives, and who never claimed to know everything about God in the first place. This is the crab bucket in action. “I just say the Third Step Prayer in the morning and thank God at night and, you know, somehow that’s kept me sober for a few 24 hours.” See how humble he is and how prideful the other person was. Acting like you’re stupid passes for humility in a lot of AA meetings. It’s also phony and inbred. Outsiders tend to pick up on this stuff and it really turns them off. Much as we like to say we’re so authentic in AA, on this kind of stuff AAs can get about as judgmental, passive aggressive, and dishonest as anyone.

The fact of the matter is that the 12 Steps are there to make us mature, powerful men and women who stride confidently and comfortably on the spiritual landscape, ever improving our conscious contact with God and deepening our understanding of Him. Even though the 11th Step reads “improve our conscious contact with God,” a lot of AAs read it as “renew.” They use prayer and meditation not to improve, but only to renew contact, to touch base with God, as it were.

There’s a world of difference there. Several times in the Big Book AAs are encouraged to reach out to religious people and learn from them. That’s so we will grow spiritually by learning more about God than our own little brains can conceive. It is not the intent of the Big Book that we remain spiritual babies crawling around the AA nursery the rest of our lives. “Be quick to see where religious people are right.” (p. 87) Not exactly the attitude I encounter in most AA meetings. “Make use of what they offer.” (p.87) “People of faith have a logical idea of what life is all about. Actually, we used to have no reasonable conception whatever.” (p. 49) Most of the early AAs belonged to churches. (p. 28) They read and shared among themselves “various religious pamphlets.” (p. 291). The Big Book explicitly suggests that we connect with or take membership in a religious body—and even be of service there. It especially notes that: “Alcoholics who have derided religious people will be helped by such contacts.” (pp. 131-132)

It’s easy enough to shop around for spiritual tapes and books that reinforce our own prejudices and keep us in our comfort zone. On the other hand, can you see how becoming part of a church community means that some of your ideas will be challenged? How you’ll be forced to rethink them, or at least be presented with new ideas that you otherwise never would have considered? That promotes humility, spiritual growth, and enlarges your understanding of God. There’s a fine line between the God of my own understanding and the God of my own making.³ Being part of a faith community is supposed to help you from falling into the latter.

Finally, I find from my own experience, that those who want to stay in the larval state of spiritual development really have never surrendered to the idea of depending on a power greater than themselves beyond AA. Typically, they pour the devotion they might be giving God into their relationships with other men in the program. Notice how they replace God with men.

- Instead of turning to God to direct their thinking (p. 86), they continually ask their sponsor to direct their thinking.
- If they face indecision in the course of the day, they do not turn to God for inspiration (p. 86), they turn to their sponsor.
- Instead of thanking God (pp. 75; 154-155), they continually thank their sponsor and other men in the program.
- Instead of talking about how God is helping them do what they could not do for themselves (p. 84), they focus on how men are helping men do what they could not do for themselves.

When you get right down to it, they don’t have much God to talk about because their concept and understanding of God hasn’t really grown since their first few months of recovery. While they do have a vital connection to the fellowship, they don’t have a particularly vital connection to God—at least, not the kind of connection described by the AAs in the Big Book:

The great fact is just this, and nothing less: That we have had deep and effective spiritual experiences which have revolutionized our whole attitude toward life, toward our fellows and toward God's universe. The central fact of our lives today is the absolute certainty that our Creator has entered into our hearts and lives in a way which is indeed miraculous. (p. 25)

Wow —“absolute certainty”? —“entered into our hearts and lives”? What a nerve, eh? You can’t say that. No one can be absolutely certain about how God works—that’s way out of line. Who can explain God, right?

If something is the central fact of your life—and on top of that, it is “miraculous”—it is likely that will be the primary thing you talk about, don’t you think? Consider what you hear at an AA meeting in this regard. Ask yourself when it is over: Given what was said, what would an outside observer conclude is the central fact of our lives today? It’s a question I ask myself every day as part of my 10th Step: If an outsider observed me over the last 24 hours, what would he conclude is the central fact of my life today?

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1 “Try to bring a person to a decision to surrender as much of himself as he knows to as much of God as he knows.” (Dick B., *Anne Smith’s Journal*, 3rd ed, pp. 25, 97) “So he said that he would surrender as much of himself as he could, to as much of Christ as he understood.” (Shoemaker, *Children of the Second Birth*, p. 25) “Life began for me with a surrender of all that I know of self to all that I knew of God.” (Foot, *Life Began Yesterday*, pp. 12-13

2 specious: having deceptive attraction or allure; having a false look of truth or genuineness.

3 There’s another AA meme that is not in the Big Book but which has taken on a certain “certified AA” quality. That is: “Find a God that you can do business with.” That sounds a lot like “the God of my own making” to me. It may not be. I’m just saying it sounds that way. To my mind, it completely misses the spirit of our way of life. IMHO the program of AA, the 12 Steps, is a regimen that, if followed, transforms me into a person that God can do business with. It isn’t that I have to find a God I can do business with, rather, I need to become a person that God can do business with. And by the way, there is only one God.