

PNC Presentation
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My name is Reilly K, currently serving as Oregon Area 58 Grapevine Chair. My home group is Bridge to Shore in Winston OR. My sobriety date is August 7, 1966.

This topic is:
PERCEPTION OF A.A. – RELIGIOUS CULT?

Why in the world are we even talking about religion and cults? Shouldn't we be curling up behind the Tenth Tradition and keeping quiet on outside issues? Why do we even care what other people think of us? We are taught to let our actions speak for us.

And they are. People both inside and out of AA observe or hear about AA meeting rituals, the many references to God, and the spiritual references cloaked in religious language. They talk about these things, and they write about them online. The "religion" label is attached. In the earliest days of AA, publicity was extremely favorable about this new miracle method of curing drunks. Now, 84 years later, the shine has worn off a little. AA hasn't changed, isn't going to, and doesn't care if you think it should.

Today's world of instant news and gossip expects modern renovations and corporate makeovers. The fact that AA sticks to its long-standing policies to some is suspect. Ironically, the evolution of the composition of AA members has altered the way groups and meetings work. Newcomers exclaim "We need to go forward!" and elders cry "We need to go back to the way it was!" This contrast in ideals helps foster the label of "cult".

AA has been involved in taking its inventory for a few years and this subject has come up recently as we explore what we look like to the rest of the world. We shouldn't be afraid to look closer at how we present ourselves.

Here are some recognized characteristics of cults. Let's look at how these are compared to, and considered similar, to some AA practices:

- Cults attempt social isolation, replacing family and friends with commitment to the new society.
 - From the Big Book p 129 “Even if he displays a certain amount of neglect and irresponsibility towards the family, it is well to let him go as far as he likes in helping other alcoholics.”
 - In AA we hear “90 meetings in 90 days”. I recently heard 120, 180 meetings in 90 days as if it’s a competition.

- Cults use mind altering practices through meditation or chanting. This promotes the illusion of unanimity.
 - AA’s 11th Step openly states “Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with god as we understood him”
 - The chant “Principles before personalities” is almost shouted during reading of the Traditions.
 - Chanting is inserted into various other readings.
 - And now, energetic arm pumping is on the rise

- Cults idolize the leaders
 - In AA meeting rooms, pictures of Bill and Dr. Bob are front and center.
 - Bill’s writings are revered.
 - Quotes from Bill, outdated and sometimes inappropriate today, are kept because “these are Bill’s words”.

- Cults use indoctrination and repetition
 - AA Readings - How it Works, Why it Works, Promises, Vision for You, More about Alcoholism lots of repetitive reading at every meeting.
 - AA Language that members speak is full of insider jargon, quotes, and clichés from the book.

- Cults claim instructions are received from god
 - AA Big Book is often referred to as “Divinely Inspired”
 - The Big Book was written in an age where Christian language was familiar and comfortable so it’s used throughout the book.
 - Members do not always substitute simpler language to help people understand what it means.
 - A higher power “as you understand” it was a concession to atheists, but they left the supernatural and male gender references alone.

- Cults demand submission to all knowing leadership
 - Big Book p62 . “He is the Father, and we are His children.”
 - Also, AA members may become controlling sponsors with rigid rules.

- Cults threaten expulsion if the members don’t adhere to the rules
 - AA groups who read the steps “God as we understand God” or any other word substitutions are sometimes told they are not an AA group.
 - Any suggestion that a group might not be adhering to AA Traditions could lead to a threat of not being listed in directories.

- Cult ex-members share stories of trauma
 - Disgruntled members who depart AA haven’t been too noticeable in the past about what they say outside. Now those unhappy ex-members have the Internet to talk to. AA has never been this publicly visible.
 - Books have been published, blogs are common, negative comments and complaints of “religious cult” are all over social media.
 - In the first generation of AA, the message was new and phenomenal. Recovery from the desire to drink was a miracle. Even as members slipped in and out, they all loved the Fellowship.
 - Outside agencies have been referring people to AA for over 30 years. There has been a steady advance toward earlier interruption in the deadly spiral of alcoholism, but not all new members are full of gratitude for that.
 - There is a lot of confusion between AA and treatment philosophies. The lines have blurred. Countless modern individuals don’t understand why AA doesn’t adopt some innovative methods like OTHER treatment facilities do. The perception of some is that AA is not only a cult, but it’s an outdated cult!

So what do **you** think? Is AA a religious cult? Some people have been quick to pin a label based on some of the similarities between AA and cults. It may be how they perceive AA, but that doesn’t mean AA has **become** a religious cult.

Besides, we are pointless as a cult. We don’t need money, power, membership, or publicity.

We only have one thing to do and we do it well. We welcome everyone who wants to be here, and we wish them luck if they don't. But is there anything we, as AA members, can do now to improve what we look like and how we act?

Yes, there are. Here are a few suggestions:

- Educate
 - Encourage your group or district to create Beginner meetings.
 - Explain how to lead a meeting.
 - Explore what the clichés mean.
 - Teach what AA is and what it is not within the rooms.
 - Hold workshops on every subject you can think of.
 - Use a meeting format that clearly tells what your group is all about.
- Rotate
 - Let the new members get involved.
 - Show them how.
 - Tell them why.
 - Teach newer people to facilitate discussions and be leaders.
- Relax.
 - No one is going to change the beloved Big Book.
 - But an interpretation in plain or simple language would be a big help to newer generations. And some of us.
- Lighten up.
 - A group conscience that allows for open diversity and discussion is still an AA group.
 - Autonomy is a good thing. We get to choose our own happy places.
 - Write your stories and experiences for the Grapevine.
 - Let your words and thoughts become part of the face of today's AA.
 - And... Let it go.
- Communicate
 - Help avoid confusion between AA and therapy programs.
 - Be willing to show newcomers the difference.
 - Interpret and decode the language when it's not understood.
 - From Big Book p47 "When, therefore, we speak to you of God, we mean your own conception of God. This applies, too, to other spiritual expressions which you find in this book. Do not let any prejudice *you may have against spiritual terms* deter you from honestly asking yourself what they mean to you."
 - Use this quote often. It may save a life.
 - Articulate clearly what you believe in.

- Listen
 - Take advantage of the living history of 2nd Generation AA members.
 - Listen to the history while the memories are still within reach.
 - Help elders to learn and use all the technology that is available today.
 - Hear the language of other members and recognize where your convictions overlap.

- Be kind. Be open. Be supportive.

These suggestions are not the things cults are made of. These are the spirit of AA and the heart of AA's future. Every day is a new world for each of us. Let's just help each other find the happiness and the freedom that's right here inside ourselves and in Alcoholics Anonymous.

Thank you for letting me serve.

Reilly K