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Some “Higher Power” Homework What is this new “god”?

Part One

By Dick B.

My Own Early Experiences

In grammar school, I said the Pledge of Allegiance to our flag. It talked of “one nation under God.” Then I got hold of some coins and bills. And they *all* said “In God we trust.” I joined the Boy Scouts, and I pledged that I would do my best to do my duty to God and my country. And, in the Army and when I was admitted to law practice, I must have sworn to uphold, protect, and defend the Constitution—knowing that one of our founding documents talked about our being “endowed by our Creator” with certain rights.

I never had any trouble knowing Who God was. And is! Actually, until I came to A.A., I never really met anyone else who had that trouble. That’s not to say I didn’t know what an atheist is: He or she is someone who doesn’t believe in God. I also acquired some knowledge about what an agnostic is: He or she is someone who just plain doesn’t know whether or not there is a God. Finally, I was the attorney for several Humanist groups in the course of my legal work; and I learned they didn’t think there was a God at all. I also learned that, despite their non-belief, the courts have specifically ruled and held they are a “religion.”

When I came to Alcoholics Anonymous, I attended thousands of meetings and participated in hundreds of Big Book studies, Step Studies, Conferences, Conventions, and Groups. And I was sufficiently sick that I didn’t give much thought to the frequent mention of “higher power” in meetings where I was present. The “higher power” stuff was just a phantom ship passing in the night. True, in the Big Book’s 3rd edition, “higher power” was mentioned—but only twice—in its basic text (on page 43 and page 100). But, in both cases, the usage was clearly in the context of “God.” Bill said so on pages 45 and 46 as well as page 100. Besides, I was told, that when you get to the Third Step and are still talking about a lightbulb or a doorknob as your “higher power,” you will be baffled with a Third Step that says you are to turn your will and your life over to the care of God—a God it says you understood. In fact, that most of us very definitely understand to one degree or another. I certainly understood that this loving God is not a lightbulb or a doorknob.

Then I began to listen to the “higher power” talk, and to do some reading about this “higher power.” Bill Wilson wrote in *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* that you could make the “group” your higher power. My treatment center people said your higher power could be “good orderly direction.” Speakers sometimes said at meetings that “it” could be “group of drunks.” Therapists said, “Fake it till you make it” and “Act as if.” Fake what! As if what! And the more I listened, the more absurd the higher powers became in the language of “recovery”—the higher

powers were tables, bulldozers, radiators, goddesses, “somethings,” “any god you want,” “yourself as not-god,” the Big Dipper, Santa Claus, and—on Friday Nights, at our Larkspur Beginner’s Meeting—“it” was regularly called “Ralph.” Honest! It was! Sadly, today you can find all of these gods, not-gods, idols, and somethings in A.A.’s Conference Approved literature and in many “scholarly” writings about the recovery field today. You can find the weird names and descriptions specifically documented in many of my books, particularly *The Oxford Group and Alcoholics Anonymous* (<http://www.dickb.com/Oxford.shtml>) and *The Good Book and The Big Book* (<http://www.dickb.com/goodbook.shtml>).

But if your life depended upon help from such a “higher power,” wouldn’t you want to know what that “higher power” was! I did. So I’ve been searching for 11 years not only to find out where A.A. came from, particularly in the Bible, but also how in the world someone threw Ralph into the mix. The longer I remained sober, the more ridiculous the Ralphs and the radiators seemed. Yet, in a telephone interview several years back, Bill Wilson’s own secretary told me on the telephone that a higher power could be a chair. Of course, she was a Buddhist; and perhaps, in her thinking, there might be a god in a chair. But such a god has no reputation for curing drunks. I sure know it isn’t our Creator or “God”—the God that Dr. Bob called my “Heavenly Father,” as did Jesus Christ, God’s only begotten Son.

Let’s Start with the Bible to Look for a “higher power”

Dr. Bob said many times that A.A.’s basic ideas came from the Bible. You can find that in *DR. BOB and the Good Oldtimers* and in Dr. Bob’s last major address in Detroit in 1948. You can see it in his talks and in the pamphlets he commissioned in Akron. To this day, I’ve never found or heard anything that indicates Bill Wilson disputed Dr. Bob’s statement about the Bible’s being the source of A.A.’s basic ideas. Nor could he. Because, even if A.A. had been borrowed exclusively from the teachings of Reverend Sam Shoemaker or exclusively from the Oxford Group itself (and it wasn’t), neither of those sources propounded any idea about Almighty God’s being called some idol like Ralph, a radiator, or a table. Or “Gertrude”—another god I recently found in a scholar’s early anonymous work.

Does the Bible Speak of a “higher power?”

What does the Bible say a “higher power” is? My research in *Young’s Analytical Concordance*, in the Bible itself, and in several Bible dictionaries shows no reference to “God” as a “higher power.” There is a reference in Romans to “higher powers;” but the reference quite clearly is not to our Creator—saying, instead, there is *no* power but of God:

Rom. 13:1,2:

Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God.

Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation.

The Good Book Commands: Thou shalt have no other gods before me (Yahweh)

There are plenty of references to our Creator, Yahweh, as the “high” or “highest” God, but God

makes it clear that there are to be no other gods before Him—nowhere! Not in chairs. Not in light bulbs. Not in radiators. Not even in Alcoholics Anonymous:

Exodus 20:3,4,5:

Thou shalt have no other gods before me

Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness *of any thing* that *is* in heaven above, or that *is* in the earth beneath, or that *is* in the water under the earth.

Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them. . . .

There is One with all power: Our Creator, Yahweh, the Highest, the God of power

He Is High All Right

Psalm 99:2:

The Lord *is* great in Zion; and he *is* high above the people.

Genesis 14:20:

And blessed be the most high God, which hath delivered thine enemies into thy hand. . . .

Psalm 93:4:

The Lord on high *is* mightier than the noise of many waters, yea, *than* the mighty waves of the sea.

Psalm 78:35:

And they remembered that God *was* their rock, and the high God their redeemer.

The Most High

Psalm 92:8:

But thou, Lord, *art most* high for evermore.

Daniel 5:18:

O thou king, the most high God gave Nebuchadnezzar thy father a kingdom, and majesty, and glory, and honour.

Mark 5:7:

And cried with a loud voice, and said, What have I to do with thee, Jesus, *thou* Son of the most high God?

In Truth, the Highest.

Luke 6:35,36:

But love ye your enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again; and your reward shall be great, and ye shall be the children of the Highest: for he is kind unto the unthankful and *to* the evil. Be *ye* therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful.

The Good Book Says of Our Creator: For *thine* is the power.

Psalm 145:11,12:

They shall speak of the glory of thy kingdom and talk of thy power.
To make known to the sons of men his mighty acts, and the glorious majesty of his kingdom.

Psalm 147:5:

Great *is* our Lord, and of great power: his understanding *is* infinite.

Psalm 150:1,2:

Praise ye the Lord. Praise God in his sanctuary: praise him in the firmament of his power. Praise him for his mighty acts: praise him according to his excellent greatness.

Matthe w 6:10, 13: Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as *it is* in heaven. . . .

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.

Ephesians 6:10, 11:

Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might.
Put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil.

1 Corinthians 2:4, 5:

And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power;
That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.

And the Bible has much more : For a much more thorough and complete study, in the Bible itself, of God's name, nature, will, power, commandments, and so on, see my titles: *By the Power of God* (<http://www.dickb.com/powerofgod.shtml>) and *Why Early A.A. Succeeded* (<http://www.dickb.com/aabiblestudy.shtml>).

Wilson, Smith, and the Pioneers spoke in the beginning only of our Creator

I've spent 11 years endeavoring to learn if A.A. was based on the Bible. It was clear, when I began, that Dr. Bob said so. It was clear that Bill W. seems never to have disputed the statement. And the Frank Amos report to John D. Rockefeller, Jr., spoke only of the Bible in reporting on early A.A. and its "Program."

When you read the Big Book's repeated references to "Creator" with a capital "C," to "Maker," with a capital "M," to "Father," with a capital "F," and to all its other Bible descriptions and mention of Almighty God, you will have a hard time finding a light bulb, a radiator, or a group that's called our living God. The idols, "somethings," "no-t-gods," and chairs came later. But compromise description of, and claims for, the status of a "god" are as old as the Bible itself. But our Creator, God Almighty, Yahweh, doesn't speak kindly of our having anything to do with other names, other gods, or any other phoney "powers."

There is no need for any of us to think someone is trying to foist Christianity or the Bible or even God Himself on present-day A.A. It can't be done. Not the way things are now. But it violates no Traditions, no principles, and no Steps of A.A. to let people in on our history and on the early A.A. reliance on our Creator that confirmed the source of early A.A.'s "miracle."

It really may cost A.A. something in the sale of its reams of literature if people return to discussing and pinpointing the history of God in A.A.. After all, you can read a Gideon Bible for free in most hotel rooms. Such discussion of God may *and does* bother some people who don't believe in God or the Bible. It may *and does* cause some treatment centers or therapists to think people won't check in if there is mention of Almighty God or of A.A.'s religious roots. But it does no service to anyone to put a lid on God.

As I've said so often: AAs may be sick when they walk into the rooms of A.A., but they are not stupid. Many A.A. old-timers say to this very day: If the word "God" scares you out of these rooms, a bottle of booze will scare you back. . . . if you live that long.

Sure, people stop drinking without God. Certainly, people get sober without A.A. In fact, people get sober in A.A. "relying" upon some phantom "higher power." In so doing, all these people—probably without even knowing it—have directly or indirectly added something to A.A. that's not the original, genuine coin of the realm. For, as Bill Wilson said:

"Belief in the power of God, plus enough willingness, honesty and humility to establish and maintain the new order of things, were the essential requirements" (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 3rd ed., pp. 13-14).

"Despite all we can say, many who are real alcoholics are not going to believe they are in that class. By every form of self-deception and experimentation, they will try to prove themselves exceptions to the rule, therefore nonalcoholic. If anyone who is showing inability to control his drinking can do the right-about-face and drink like a gentleman, our hats are off to him. Heaven knows, we have tried hard enough and long enough to drink like other people (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 3rd ed., p. 31).

"We trust infinite God rather than our finite selves. . . . We never apologize to anyone for depending upon our Creator (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 3rd ed., p. 68).

"If he [the candidate for A.A.] thinks he can do the job in some other way, or prefers some other spiritual approach, encourage him to follow his own conscience. We have no monopoly on God; we merely have an approach that worked with us" (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 3rd ed., p. 95).

Typically, Dr. Bob said it much more simply:

"If you think you are an atheist, an agnostic, a skeptic, or have any other form of intellectual pride which keeps you from accepting what is in this book, I feel sorry for you. . . . Your Heavenly Father will never let you down!" (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 3rd ed., p. 181).

Here's Your "higher power" Homework

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Origin Unknown

I don't know where Bill Wilson got his "higher power." As far as I can ascertain, he never told us. He definitely dabbled in spiritualism. He definitely dabbled in "New Thought." He definitely dabbled in the writings of Williams James. There is even one Oxford Group writing that mentions a "higher power" (though Oxford Group activist and expert Rev. T. Willard Hunter told me personally that he had never heard in the Oxford Group of any "higher power"). So like today's mysterious "Bin Laden," our "higher power"—varying in location and scope from chairs to Santa Claus seems to be hiding its roots. If you find those roots, please let us all know. I have a hunch you will find the "higher power" is really God in the minds of those who use the phrase. But they are scared to death to surrender and admit their need for God. Or they are scared to death of a church or their former church. Or they just plain don't want to read the Bible, or our history, or perhaps not even the Big Book and its earlier manuscripts (See: *Turning Point: A History of Early A.A.'s Spiritual Roots and Successes*. <http://www.dickb.com/Turning.shtml>).

Some Sources which were probably read by some early AAs. And Which You Can Research.

A few early AAs read the following books which mention a "higher power" of some sort: (1) *In Tune with the Infinite: Or Fullness of Peace, Power, and Plenty*, by Ralph Waldo Trine. (2) *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, by Williams James. (3) *Religion and Medicine: The Moral Control of Nervous Disorders*, by Worcester, McComb, and Coriat. (4) *I Was a Pagan*, by Victor Kitchen. And are there more? I'm inclined to think there may be because of the large numbers of new thought writers, the immense research and writing done by William James, the interest in "mind-cure" ideas, and the popularity of Victor Kitchen with Bill Wilson and in the New York Oxford Group circles.

I personally have no particular interest in "new thought" literature. Nor am I a fan of the religious views, if any, of William James. Nor has much evidence come to my attention concerning the possible successes McComb, et.al. Nor do I find anything in Kitchen's writing that suggests he was simply referring to some "Higher Power," with which he needed to establish a relationship, and which he came to recognize as God as a result of his Oxford Group experiences. Nor have I seen much in any of the foregoing writings (other than Kitchen's) that suggests a strong belief in the power of our Creator; or in the necessity for coming to Him through confessing Jesus as Lord and believing God raised Jesus from the dead (Romans 10:9). My particular interest, as is known by many, is in the Bible; the truth about God and His power and His will that can be found in the Bible; the necessity for coming to Him through Jesus Christ; and the exceedingly abundant power and healing available to those of us who choose that route (See Ephesians 3:20). In fact, I have found that even Bill Wilson's medical mentor, Dr. William Duncan Silkworth, had spoken positively about making a turn to Jesus Christ, whom he called the Great Physician, for the healing of alcoholism (See: *The Positive Power of Jesus Christ*, by Norman Vincent Peale).

Part Two of this Article may prove helpful to you in tracking the origin of "higher power" and help you do more research on the subject if you care to. It's sure not my area of expertise.

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