

RECOVERING THE *VIA PURGATIVA*:
HOW THE 12-STEP
PROGRAM REVIVES
THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION OF SPIRITUAL FORMATION

A Synthesis Paper
by David A. Sylvester

presented to
The Faculty of the
Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Theological Studies

Berkeley, California
May 2009

Committee Signatures

_____ Lisa Fullam, Director	_____ Date
_____ Thomas Cattoi, Reader	_____ Date
_____ Merrill Swiney, Reader	_____ Date

Table of Contents

I. INTRODUCTION	2
II. SPIRITUALITY, THEOLOGY AND RELIGION	8
A. SPIRITUALITY AND THE NEW THEOLOGY OF AA	10
B. CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY AND ITS THEOLOGY	21
III. PRE-RECOVERY AND PRE-CONVERSION.....	25
IV. “HITTING BOTTOM” AS THE CRISIS OF CONVERSION	31
V. RECOVERY AS SPIRITUAL FORMATION.....	32
A. FIRST PHASE: STEPS 1 TO 3 AS METANOIA	33
B. SECOND PHASE: MORAL REPAIR AS THE <i>VIA PURGATIVA</i>	36
1. <i>Self-Centeredness as Philautia</i>	37
2. <i>Misdirected Instincts as Unnatural Passions</i>	40
3. <i>Character Defects as the Capital Sins</i>	44
4. <i>Daily Inventory as Examen of Conscience</i>	45
5. <i>A New Peace as Dispassion?</i>	46
C. THIRD PHASE: A NEW WAY OF LIFE AS PRACTICING VIRTUES.....	47
VI. A CHRISTIAN REFLECTION: REVIVING THE <i>VIA PURGATIVA</i>	49
BIBLIOGRAPHY	53
APPENDIX: THE 12 STEPS OF ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS.....	55

I. INTRODUCTION

Since it began in the private conversations among two self acknowledged “hopeless drunks” in the late 1930s, Alcoholics Anonymous has become a modern phenomenon. Its 12-Step program of recovery has been adapted to a seemingly endless variety of compulsions involving drugs, shopping, overeating, smoking, gambling, destructive and dependent relationships. Some of its enthusiastic supporters have hailed its program of recovery as “the most significant phenomenon in the history of ideas in the twentieth century”¹ and as new therapy having “a vast potential for the myriad of other ills of mankind.”² At the same time, its success has come at the price of some criticism from psychologists and traditional religious denominations. Some of these critics claim that the 12-Step proponents exaggerate the results of its success and cite scientific studies showing only moderate success among its members achieving long-term sobriety rates. Others think the Steps are psychologically damaging, undermining self-esteem and encouraging passivity. Some of the more traditional religious denominations are suspicious of it as “non-Christian.” Yet for all this criticism, its popularity has few rivals. An estimated 5 million Americans -- 2 percent of the population of the United States over the age of 12 -- participate in 12-Step groups for alcohol and drug abuse.³

In all the debate about addiction and its treatment, both supporters and critics overlook one key fact about the 12 Steps: None of the steps, except the first, mention the object of the addiction, whether it is alcohol, substances or an unhealthy behavior. In fact, only Step 1 talks

¹ Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham, *The Spirituality of Imperfection: Storytelling and the Search for Meaning*. (New York: Bantam Books, 1992), 4. Cites recent claims, including the Lasker Award of the American Public Health Association in 1951, when AA had helped in the recovery of 120,000 alcoholics.

² The Statement of the Lasker Award of the American Public Health Association. 1951. Full text in *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age: A Brief History of AA* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1957), 301.

³ “The NSDUH Report: Participation in Self-Help Groups for Alcohol and Illicit Drug Use: 2006 and 2007” in *National Survey on Drug Use and Health*, November 13, 2008, Office of Applied Studies, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

about object of addiction, but not as the problem. The problem is that the addict is “powerless” over the object of addiction.⁴ Of all the 12 Steps, six focus on God, directly or indirectly. Seven of the steps focus on the moral wrongs of the addict⁵ and how he or she can repair them. Step 12 recommends a new way of life based on the program’s values and the need to help other suffering addicts. This last step summarizes the result of the program yet never mentions sobriety or an improved life – the hallmarks of success by which AA and 12-Step programs are often judged. As a result of the Steps, the recovering addict experiences, according to this last step, “a spiritual awakening.” At this point, the casual observer might wonder: What does a “spiritual awakening” have to do with alcoholism or any other addiction?

I will show that AA and its 12 Step program is not about alcoholism or even addiction; it is about what Christian tradition used to call spiritual formation. The key to understanding the modern phenomenon of the 12 Steps is to recognize how it has revived the historical Christian practices of moral purification and ethical transformation. Historically, these have run like a backbone through Western history since the earliest times. Pre-Christian Greek and Roman ethical philosophers produced an extensive literature on the proper education of the young and the development of the character of citizens for the good life. Jesus Christ and his disciples lived and preached the need to follow the commandments, and the early Patristic writers gave the first theological Christian interpretations for a classical culture. Through the experience of the Christian masters, spiritual formation became central in the western Latin church tradition, generally in the form of the practice of the Three Ways of spiritual growth, summarized as the

⁴ See Appendix for Steps.

⁵ A note on terminology: Alcoholics Anonymous was founded to help alcoholics recover from their compulsive addiction; other 12-Step groups use the same principles on other compulsive addictions. When speaking strictly of AA, we will refer to the addict as an alcoholic, but when discussing the 12-Step program in general, we will refer to the participant as an addict. In this way, we must remember that alcoholism is only one form of addiction, and the principles of AA are aimed at the underlying addiction in whatever form it takes.

via purgativa, the *via illuminativa* and the *via unitiva*, and in what became the Eastern Orthodox tradition, the phases leading toward *theosis*, or deification.

Until the 19th century, Christian life was conceived as the effort, through the grace of God and in relationship with Jesus Christ, to strive for Christian “perfection” beginning with the rejection of Satan at baptism and continuing with moral purification and a life-long struggle against temptations and sin. The path led ultimately to a spiritual union with God. For the religious and monastics, this was their primary vocation, but the path and goal remained the same as an ideal for the laity within the context of their domestic lives. Morality manuals were the staple of popular literature for Christian meditation from the 1600s to the 1800s,⁶ and a secular version of this path was called “character improvement.” In his autobiography, Benjamin Franklin popularized this practice of the virtues and philanthropic service as the key to his success in the world.⁷

But in the past 50 years, the practice of spiritual formation has largely disappeared as part of routine life for many denominations of church-going Christians. Although some interest has grown for retreats and group meditation, the primary form of Christian practice has become the attendance at Sunday services. In the Roman Catholic context, the homilies at Mass might focus on how to understand the Gospel stories, but they are rarely about practices that would help a person form an interior life more in the image of God, such as instruction in prayer, the need for daily examination of conscience and sinful behavior, the proper ways to repent, confess and do penance. Some have noted a sharp decline among Roman Catholics participating in the confession and penance of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and secular social commentators

⁶ Roger Baxter, S.J. ed. *Meditations for Every Day in the Year*, (New York: Benzinger Brothers, 1884)

⁷ Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Ben Franklin*, (New York: Touchstone, 2003), 66-69.

have noticed that sin has vanished from public discussion.⁸ Less noticed has been the loss of the accompanying ideas of grace, heaven and hell, damnation and salvation. However, sin and hell might have vanished from public discussion as concepts, but acute suffering has remained a reality in people's lives. It was the alcoholics of the 1930s, struggling with their deadly addiction and feeling "the gates of hell" had closed on them "with a clang," who recaptured the tradition of spiritual formation that had fallen into desuetude.⁹

This clarification of AA and its 12 Steps for what it is – a program for spiritual awakening --- as well as for what it is not – a treatment program on a medical model that cures addiction– is essential for understanding many of the confusions and paradoxes about the 12-Step phenomenon and modern religious life. This understanding shows that most of the secular debates and interpretations, both favorable and hostile, of the 12 Steps confuse the program's means, achieving sobriety, with the goal, spiritual growth. It rebuts the mistaken secular approach of improving self-esteem, and self-confidence, which inadvertently reinforce the spiritual self-centeredness at the root of the addiction. It also shows that scientific analysis of the results of 12-Step recovery is mistaken when it interprets the "disease" of alcoholism primarily as a medical condition, not a spiritual one. Finally, such a clarification also reveals the serious failure of the Christian Churches in emphasizing beliefs and creeds at the expense of what suffering people really need the most, spiritual formation.

To show how the 12-Step program recaptures Christian spiritual formation, we will compare the phases of the two paths to growth. We will see that the agony that the active addict

⁸ Karl Menninger, *What Became of Sin?* (New York: Bantam Books, 1973)

⁹ See conversation between Rowland H. and psychologist Carl Jung. Anonymous, *Alcoholics Anonymous: The Story of How Many Thousands of Men and Women Have Recovered from Alcoholism*. 4th Edition. (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous Publishing, 2001), 26-27. Called the AA "Big Book" but referred to here as the book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*.

experiences before recovery bears resemblance to the suffering of the unconverted sinner who has turned away from God in traditional Christian terminology. Then, the moment when the addict “hits bottom” and enters recovery resembles in some ways the crisis that can lead to religious conversion. In examining the 12-Step program of recovery, we will see that the addict must first turn from self toward some kind of faith in a power greater than himself or herself – similar to the turn from sin toward God that constitutes the *metanoia* of conversion leading to baptism in Christian tradition. The addict must then submit to a detailed moral evaluation to find the roots of past behavior, not in conditions or external problems but in the spiritual flaws of character. As the addict becomes aware of these “character defects,” he or she must confess the failings to God and to another person and take concrete action to repair the harms committed. In religious terms, we will see how this revives aspects of the ascetic struggle against the passions and temptations in the *via purgativa*. Finally, 12-Step recovery calls for a new way of life that involves helping others who are still suffering from addiction. In some ways, this recaptures the Christian commissioning of the disciples to spread the Good News while pursuing the practice of the virtues during the *via illuminativa*.

However, this comparison will also show that the 12 Steps do not replace a traditional religious discipline. Originally, the AA’s 12-Steps were intended to be only what co-founder Bill Wilson called a “spiritual kindergarten,”¹⁰ not a modern replacement for traditional religious life, as some enthusiasts claim.¹¹ In this paper we will focus on the Christian tradition, partly because it forms the roots of AA’s development and partly because of my personal conviction of its truth. However, all of the world’s religious traditions have developed over

¹⁰ "We are only operating a spiritual kindergarten in which people are enabled to get over drinking and find the grace to go on living to better effect. Each man's theology has to be his own quest, his own affair." From: Bill W., *As Bill Sees It: The AA Way of Life*, (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1967), 95.

¹¹ Kurst and Ketcham, 13-29.

centuries of human experience and provide an irreplaceable wellspring of wisdom and experience in the human-divine encounter. For this reason, we can ask whether 12 Steps have inherent contradictions that will eventually frustrate long-time spiritual seekers. For Christians and especially Roman Catholics, who are tempted rely too much on the 12 Steps for spiritual formation instead of Church tradition, we can wonder if long-term spiritual growth possible without the Church's sacraments, or, most crucially, without the person and spirit of Jesus Christ.

If so, then the 12-Steps program may well produce its own lacuna which Christian churches need to fill, not by developing imitative "12-Steps for Christians," but by reviving their own traditions, especially the difficult practice of the *via purgativa*. If they did, they could provide a deeper, more satisfying response to the plague of spiritual hunger and suffering that the popularity of the 12-Steps has revealed.

II. SPIRITUALITY, THEOLOGY AND RELIGION

Two themes – spirituality and theology – and their institutional basis in religion will run throughout this analysis. Broadly speaking, we will identify “spirituality” as a synonym for the dynamics of the interior life of a person’s soul, and “theology” as the way we talk about these experiences with others. This means that the life of the soul – its “spirituality” -- flows from a person’s interior experiences, as it grows toward or away from God. But interior does not mean private; interior experiences can come not only from internal sources but also from external sources, such as spiritual reading, discussion and communal prayer. There remains, however, a fundamental distinction between an external event, such as the words spoken by someone else, and our internal assent or rejection of the event. In this way, social experiences in community also shape our spirituality when we appropriate them, that is, when they resonate within us so clearly that we assent to them and absorb them into our soul.

We will see “theology” as the effort to understand, explain, and communicate one’s “spiritual experience” to a community, presumably in a way that helps advance the spiritual awareness of both the individual and the community. For this reason, theology is fundamentally relational and communal. It allows the community to use words and ideas, art and symbols to share ineffable experiences in a way that deepens the understanding of all. At its best, theology offsets the individualism of pure spirituality, but at its worst, theology becomes a false substitute for genuine spiritual experience and becomes doctrinal ideology. Thomas a Kempis warned about this: “Lofty words do not make a man just or holy; but a good life makes him dear to God. I would far rather feel contrition than be able to define it.”¹²

¹² Thomas a Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1952) I.1 on pg. 27