

Regarding The Choice of A Name For The Thursday “Freethinkers in Al-Anon” Group

The following commentary is by Allan J., a grateful member of Al-Anon for many years, upon having read and studied the [WSO e-mails on this subject](#).

1) The WSO states that a Group’s name should clearly indicate and emphasize the ability of the Group to engage in Step 12, and that this should be paramount in choosing a name. WSO fears that otherwise, Newcomers may not be attracted to a Group if the Group name does not strongly indicate how the Group will help them.

The writer does not know of any existing Al-Anon Group that includes the words “Step 12” in its name. Since very few, if any, groups do include “Step 12” in their name, WSO must have a reason why there are so many groups not identifying themselves as “Step 12” groups. One is also puzzled as to how Newcomers, upon first coming to Al-Anon, know that “Step 12” is the very essence of why they are coming to that group.

2) “Al-Anon Without Religion” is unacceptable to WSO as a Group name. That name does not suggest that the Group is open to people “of any faith or none”. That is, Al-Anon is quite tolerant of Groups that welcome members with an underlying religious belief, regardless of the religion, or how strongly the member’s belief may be. WSO clearly states that such a name indicates that such a meeting may well be based on religion, which they say is not the case. They believe that a name which highlights “without religion implies underlying religious beliefs”, which is not Al-Anon.

Therefore, since every Group must be open predominantly for those with religious beliefs, and given the religiosity found in all Al-Anon literature and most meeting formats, there must be an inherent religious base in Al-Anon. But if the words “without religion” are used in the Group’s name, that implies to WSO that no Al-Anon Group has any underlying religious beliefs, which is inappropriate and should not be so.

This convoluted reasoning appears to suggest that every Group should endorse religious beliefs but should not have “underlying religious belief”. WHICH IS IT??

3) “Al-Anon Without Prayer” is unacceptable to WSO as a Group name. Step 11 states that everyone working the Steps must seek “through prayer and meditation Conscious contact with God”, to the extent that only the will of this “God” is what must dictate the thoughts, words and behaviors of each individual member. That is, “self-will” is not to be tolerated in any way, shape or form.

WSO says that any Al-Anon group that welcomes agnostics and atheists, non-believers and freethinkers, must most strongly require them to read and obey the Steps, Traditions and Concepts exactly as written. This is absolute, unmitigated DOMINANCE, one of the three obstacles to success in Al-Anon, which we are told “is likely to have disastrous consequences for group harmony. Oddly enough, it is quite acceptable to exclude the Serenity Prayer, so that even a traditional Al-Anon group can be without some prayers!

The Serenity Prayer was written by American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr probably in 1932, and was comprised of three verses. WSO strictly follows the practice of ignoring the second and third verses. If it is OK for WSO to always ignore verses 2 and 3, and then say it is OK to drop the first verse as well, why is it not OK to take another look at Step 11 and discard all underlying, and all openly obvious religious

associations? Is it because Niebuhr was considered an exemplary proponent of evangelical religious tenets, who battled both religious liberals and religious conservatives, thereby deserving unsung recognition for his prayers? And yet, WSO still insists that Al-Anon must follow both underlying and obvious religious tenets, while not admitting to do so.

4) “Non-believers and All Others AFG” is acceptable to WSO, citing only its apparent inclusiveness “of any religious faith or none”.

This name defeats the very reason why our Group has chosen “Freethinkers in Al-Anon”, to tell those seeing the name, that we feel free to think as our inner voices lead us, individually and collectively. We do not find it necessary to focus on Steps 11 and 12 as written, in order to seek recovery. Although it would be a very long name, perhaps the WSO-suggested name might be “Non-believers And All Others Of Some Religious Faith”. It does express the overall inclusiveness of which WSO is so protective.

5) “No Prayer AFG” is not acceptable to the WSO for the reasons given above for “Al-Anon Without Prayer”.

The reasons given above for discarding the WSO “logic” also apply to their rejection of this name.

6) “One Big Tent” is, oddly enough, acceptable to WSO, even though it is the title of a book published in 2018 by AA’s “Grapevine” magazine. Surely WSO is aware of a few things about AA’s publications, even one that has only been available for 3 years? Co-operation with AA is one thing, but stealing the title of an AA publication without approval, for an Al-Anon group name, is something else!

This name carries a strong and obvious association with evangelical Christianity in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when a bible-thumping evangelical preacher came to town. A “big tent” was set up, in which “revival meetings” were held, to obtain converts to the variety of religiosity that was being preached. Use of this WSO-suggested name would clearly suggest that our Al-Anon group is part of AA, from which we derived the 12 Steps and 12 Traditions, but not today’s AA’s more liberal outlook. My reading of “One Big Tent” left me with the distinct impression that although the authors of the stories professed to be atheists and agnostics, they still adhered to the traditional AA program.

7) “No One Pressured AFG” is not acceptable to WSO, because it implies that all other Al-Anon groups may resort to pressure tactics and activities in the name of “recovery”.

Does WSO not recognize that WSO itself is trying to pressure our group into conforming to the requirements of the Service Manual, and to the Steps, Traditions and Concepts of the traditional Al-Anon program, while prohibiting the free thinking that has come from our individual inner voices for so many years? We cannot remain as Al-Anon members if our desire to think for ourselves is prohibited. After all, our individual sharing at any Al-Anon meeting arises from our individual (free) thinking about the chosen discussion topic.

8) “No Musts Al-Anon” would, I think be acceptable to WSO. After all, it is very frequently used when speaking, particularly with newcomers, who are concerned that they “may not be working the Al-Anon program properly”. So, they are told there is no specific proper way to work the program, except to come to meetings, get a sponsor, work the steps, do service etc. etc.

And yet, how often are we told in Al-Anon “that there are no ‘musts’ in Al-Anon? If we were to consider this name as a possibility, why not take it a bit farther, and choose “Take What You Like And Leave The Rest” as

our name. Then we would not have to worry about whether we, or any newcomers, are working the program “properly”. Rather, this name would be quoting directly from the “Suggested AI-Anon Closing”!

9) “Free Thinkers AFG” would be acceptable to WSO.

But is this not the essence of the very name that appears at the top of our present meeting format, “Freethinkers in AI-Anon”? WSO does not present a single word to tell us why “Free Thinkers AFG” is acceptable, whereas “Freethinkers in AI-Anon” apparently is not. Our choice clearly indicates that we are part of AI-Anon, whereas the WSO choice would not!

WHAT ARE WE ARGUING ABOUT?

10) “As We Understood AFG” is acceptable to WSO as a group name, because it is the direct quotation of the title of a piece of copyrighted CAL. It is cited as an example, thus indicating that the title of any piece of AI-Anon copyrighted literature may be used as a group name, regardless of copyright.

If this is, in fact, permissible and acceptable, a review of the AI-Anon literature list includes several existing titles that could appropriately be adapted as a name for our group, such as: “Living In Saecularitas”. “Saecularitas” is the medieval Latin root meaning “secularity”. Obviously, it is related to “secular”, for which one of the meanings is “lasting for an age or ages; continuing for a long time, or from age to age”, which accurately describes the longevity of “secularity”. Another possibility for our group name, based on CAL, would be “Courage To Think Freely”.

11) Valerie quotes from pages 85 and 86 of the Service Manual, the single sentence/requirement that, “The group’s name should be inviting to all and reflect AI-Anon principles.” She also quoted that, “The WSO did not feel that this name met those criteria.”

The context suggests that Valerie is referring to the name of the Boise Group, and not the name we have submitted for registration, “Freethinkers In AI-Anon”. In our case, the contentious word apparently is “Freethinkers”. It describes who we are, but does not in the least, exclude anyone who is interested in AI-Anon, regardless of their personal underlying religious beliefs (if any). One should be mindful of the second sentence of Tradition 3, which states the requirement from membership in AI-Anon: “The only requirement for membership is that there be a problem of alcoholism in a relative or friend” Clearly, the word “freethinkers” does not violate that requirement.

Valerie, or WSO, really must make a compelling argument, which shows how our name choice clearly and positively violates Tradition 3, and is not “inviting to all”. This is particularly important, because every AI-Anon meeting invites people to “try at least 6 meetings, before deciding if AI-Anon is for them”. As individuals, we are free to choose a group, not because of its name, but more appropriately, because of what transpires in that room in the process of leading to “recovery”.

The second part of Valerie’s quotation from pages 85 and 86, suggests that a group’s name “should ... Reflect AI-Anon principles.” “Principles” are referenced only in the index of the books “Paths to Recovery” and” AI-Anon’s Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions”. Many pages are cited in each book, requiring much reading, followed by significant condensation, to produce a set of words that would “reflect AI-Anon principles” in a group’s name. Moreover, the verb “should” precedes the “requirements”, which means that these two conditions are suggestions only, and not binding requirements. If they were to be binding

requirements, the correct usage would be the verb “shall”. But we recall that “there are no musts in Al-Anon”, and then “should all over ourselves”!

12) Valerie also quotes the often-used statement “Al-Anon is a spiritual, not religious, program”, apparently believing that by simply making this assertion, it automatically becomes akin to a “tenet”, and must therefore be absolutely true and requiring no explanation, and thus completely beyond denial.

By my count, the “God” word appears approximately 169 times in “Courage To Change”. When capitalized, this refers unequivocally to the Abrahamic God, the traditional God of Israel, originating in the Hebrew Bible. The Abrahamic God is the source of the Hebrew “Yahweh”, the Christian “God”, and the Islamic “Allah”. Neither the Hebrew “Yahweh”, nor the Islamic “Allah” are referenced even once in “Courage To Change”, thereby certainly discouraging those potential newcomers who do not believe in the Christian “God”. Clearly, this singular reference to a deity is neither inclusive, nor “inviting to all”. The term “Higher Power”, when capitalized, is simply a code expression for the “God” word, and appears about 200 times in “Courage To Change”. By way of contrast, the word “spiritual” appears perhaps 79 times in “Courage To Change”.

Obviously, given the frequency of the combined use of the capitalized religiously-derived terms, compared to the much lesser use of the generic term “spiritual”, Al-Anon is much more deserving of being called a “religious” program rather than a “spiritual” program. Should this sort of comparison be applied to other Al-Anon literature, and to our sharing during meetings, such comparison would almost certainly show similar results.

One additional point: When I looked through a database of secular AA meetings held worldwide, there were over 500 meetings, and a significant number included “Non-believer”, “Secular” or “Freethinker” in their names. The never-ending advocating for AA “non-God” meetings began with Jim B., who was among the first 10 members of AA. Here is a Quotation from Bill W., recalling AA’s first years:

“In AA’s first years, I all but ruined the whole undertaking with this sort of unconscious arrogance. God as I understood Him had to be for everybody. Sometimes my aggression was subtle and sometimes it was crude. But either way it was damaging—perhaps fatally so—to numbers of nonbelievers. Even now, I catch myself chanting same old barrier-building refrain: ‘Do as I do, believe as I do—or else!’”

Bill W. A.A. Grapevine, April 1961

And finally, I consulted my favourite reference sources as necessary:

My Oxford Dictionary (1911) lists “free-thinker” as two words, hyphenated, meaning “rejector etc. of authority in religious belief, rationalist, unconstrained” (among many other combinations using “free”)

My Webster’s New World Dictionary (1953) lists “freethinker” as one word, meaning “a person who forms his opinions about religion independently of tradition, authority, or established belief”. It also suggests consulting “atheist” as a synonym.

My Gage Canadian Dictionary (1983) lists “freethinker” as one word, meaning “a person who forms his religious opinions independently of authority or tradition”.