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Addiction and Grace

The theological relevance of a new movement

BY THE REV. J. B. HARRISON

"ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS" is a new redemptive movement which is not associated with any accepted system of theology, but which has achieved, in many countries already, startling results in the reversal and restoration of a multitude of "hopeless cases". Alcoholism is perhaps the most widespread of all compulsive narcotic cravings to-day and is generally regarded by both pastor and doctor as one of the most hopeless to reverse. It is, as Father John Ford, S. J., Professor of Moral Theology, Weston College, Mass., has called it, "A sickness of body, mind and soul." Not only does it destroy both body and personality, it builds up a new alien alcoholic personality which bears all the marks of demon possession. In fact, a leading English psychiatrist who has made a special study of the problems of the alcoholic, once remarked to the writer, "Since I have turned from general psychiatry to specialize in work for alcoholics, I have come to believe in devil-possession."

For the alcoholic—that is to say the compulsive drinker who can never take one drink without the overwhelming need for "Just one more" until he becomes completely stupified—life becomes impossible. He cannot live with alcohol and he cannot live without it. From this hopeless dilemma "Alcoholics Anonymous" has within twenty years rescued some 150,000 addicts. It is inevitable that because of its dramatic results, it should have received the consideration of moral theologians. Roman Catholic theologians, particularly in America, have given serious thought to the theological implications of the success of "Alcoholics Anonymous", and the first major work of this nature to be produced in this country has been written by a Methodist missionary teacher, the Rev. Frederick B. Rea, whose book, *Alcoholism—Its Psychology and Cure*—was immediately recognized as authoritative. Mr. Rea's interest in "Alcoholics Anonymous" was kindled by a visit to his native Ireland one furlough. It was in Ireland that the movement first touched these islands from America. An Irish-American member on holiday in his native land decided to do some "Twelfth Step" work, and, assuming that the nearest sphere of operations would be the mental hospital, went there. His first contact, who had been consigned there by his family as a "hopeless case", is now a living witness to the remarkable power of the movement, for he himself has been a strong and indefatigable rescuer of many others in these islands ever since.

It is appropriate that from Ireland should have come our first treatise on our subject—a little book called *Drink and Compulsion—A Catholic View of Alcoholism*, by Dr. Sean O'Riordan. It arose from an article which appeared in the American Roman Catholic magazine, *Integrity*. In it an addict, "John Doe," tells how he had tried to master his addiction by attendance on the Means of Grace, but had consistently

failed. As a faithful member of his Church he was astonished that he should find his salvation in a secular fellowship which refuses to owe allegiance to any religious system. He writes about his struggles, "I tried the Sacraments. Between drinking bouts I made frequent and intensive use of the channels of grace available to me. They did not seem to help. When not drinking, I was a daily Communicant, I did a lot of spiritual reading, I made frequent retreats, I have knelt far into the night saying the rosary with arms outstretched in penance and petition. But I have come from a private closed retreat with the utmost fervour and devotion—and walked straight into the first saloon I met. I have frequently been at Holy Communion in the morning and drunk the same night." Neither his desire to conquer his addiction nor his devotion to his Church could be questioned, yet, after more years than he could care to remember, he was only able to break his hopeless pattern of defeat through an organization outside the Church.

The problem as posed by Dr. O'Riordan is, "There we have a concrete case of a man who overcame the grip of his fatal habit by natural means of physical and psychological readjustment when he had failed to do so by supernatural means directed at overcoming temptation." The problem must be faced by us all, for the pattern of defeat is common to alcoholics in the reformed Churches also. The "A.A." recovery programme is based on its Twelve Steps formulated by two addicts in America who sought to help each other, and John Doe asks, "If a man can stop drinking by following twelve rules of conduct laid down by two drunks, why can he not stop by following the ten commandments and the moral and ascetic teaching of his faith?"

First it must be recognized that the Twelve Steps presuppose that God is gracious and that a man may share fellowship with God without necessarily being a practising member of any Church. Undoubtedly the pattern of the Twelve Steps derives from the Christian revelation which enabled St. Paul to point the way of progress from defeat to victory in the central chapters of his letter to the Romans. The "A.A." member is asked first to admit his complete personal helplessness. Then he is asked to believe that "A Power greater than ourselves can restore us to sanity", and to turn his will and life over "to the care of God" as he understands him. Then follows a personal moral inventory with admission to God and the "A.A." sponsor, and group of the nature of the wrongs recognized. From this point follows readiness "to have God remove all these defects of character", humble request for Him to do so, restitution to others for wrongs done, continuing humility before God in prayer and meditation for knowledge of His will and power to carry it out, and the final great stride of "Twelfth-stepping" when the "A.A." member, "having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps," tries to carry the message to other alcoholics and to practise these principles in all his affairs.

If we can believe that it is possible for people to have a spiritual awakening while trusting in God's grace, apart from the "Means of Grace" as offered by the Church, then one part of what to Dr. O'Riordan must remain a problem, falls away for us. There is no doubt that

"A.A." groups have proved that their programme of fellowship with God and one another is effective in sharing the saving grace of God, and that the "spiritual" rather than the "mechanical" transmission of grace is the valid one. This movement illustrates the immense significance for our spiritual progress of our Lord's word that the Spirit, like the wind, "bloweth where it listeth" and can never be confined or contained along exclusive channels. So, although we would not agree with Dr. O'Riordan that the "A.A." programme is simply a "natural means" of readjustment, we, in the reformed Churches, still must ask ourselves why we have been equally ineffective in dealing with the alcoholic.

Although our conception of grace may be adequate, our technique of meditation may not have been. John Doe points to this when he says that the effective agent in breaking the power of his addiction was the combined use of two techniques of mediation which "can bring about conversion of life where sacramental confession has failed. Now, the Grace of God never fails. So there must be something blocking the channel. That block can only be man's failure to co-operate with the grace. The failure, in turn, must essentially lie in the understanding or will of the penitent. Granted that the penitent alcoholic really wants to stop, and, allowing for the weakness of will born of habitual self-indulgence, we must put a large part of the blame on the penitent's understanding. He does not understand the nature of his soul-sickness and he does not understand the absolute necessity of specific remedial action. That is where the priest should come in as physician of souls. And this is where the priest so often fails. He fails to enlighten the patient's understanding. He fails to prescribe a régime for the strengthening of his will. 'A.A.' does both."

Grace, therefore, to be effective must be ministered with understanding of the penitent's condition—an understanding which is a compassionate but uncompromising appreciation of his entirely helpless condition. This is the key both to the success of "A.A." and the failure of the Church in their dealings with the alcoholic, and there is some truth in Dr. Billy Graham's assertion that "A.A." is doing what the Church should have done. It is quite clear that a saved alcoholic can best understand a despairing one, but it is equally clear that anyone who knows in his own experience the New Testament teaching on Law and Grace and the plain theological distinction between the religions of eros and agape, may hope to minister effectively to an alcoholic. Saving grace is of the Promise of God to human helplessness; never is it gained by self-effort. How many a sincere Christian pastor or doctor, called into the family turmoil by despairing relatives, has done no more than to tell an alcoholic to pull himself together. By contrast, the "A.A." sponsor says, "Recognize and acknowledge your utter helplessness, then lean back, and float on the loving power of God." "A.A." has brought again to the forefront of our attention, with the witness of signs which have amazed the despairing onlookers, that, in the words of F. B. Rea, "Christianity is a religion of *agape*: the self-giving God of love bestows grace upon man who can only be saved by learning to accept and receive."

It is through realizing his helplessness that the addict is able to

accept the Grace of God, but what does "A.A." offer in methods of "receiving"? Here we must consider more closely John Doe's reference to the "two techniques". The first practical implication of the Christian revelation of Grace is that of forgiveness for the past and loving providence in the future; thus hope is given to pull the addict up from "the ever-descending spiral of his own despair". Christianity is a religion of hope, and it is hope alone which can inspire in the patient the kind of co-operation which is essential to appreciating the goal of recovery and the techniques by which it is reached. The goal must be complete abstinence—"Contented sobriety". The alcoholic is made to realize that he lives all his life just one drink away from disaster, for it is a sign of the addict, as compared with the heavy drinker, that one drink saps his control to such an extent that, once started, he cannot stop until stupified. Often the aim of the Christian missionary in the past has been to get the drunks without distinction to the penitent form, put a pen in one hand and a card in the other, on which they pledge themselves to give up drinking for the rest of their lives. This method may have its value for the man who is experiencing the first pangs of drunken shame, but such pledges would never have been exacted if the missionary had really understood which in that shame-faced row were merely selfish and which were truly sick unto death. How many alcoholics have sworn how many times to give up the drink for ever, but have failed because they were sick, while being condemned to despair because they were taught to regard themselves merely as selfish. It is because "A.A." knows that compulsive drinkers are primarily sick men that they have based their first technique on a maxim of our Lord's, whose therapeutic significance had not hitherto been fully realized and practised within the Christian fellowship. "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof."

For the sake of his own mental health in the face of his stupendous task, the alcoholic is committed only to one day at a time, or even one hour at a time. One restored alcoholic once said in conversation that he started out only "a minute at a time". God's forgiveness has wiped out the despairs of the past, God's Providence is sufficient for the hopes of the future, and so he must live for this day, this moment. If he "skids" he now reckons not on a whole future ruined for ever, as in the hopeless past, but on so many days of sobriety behind him which are a triumph of grace sufficient to give him hope in making a fresh start at this very hour of this very day. So the resolve never to drink again is broken down into the aim never to take the first drink to-day.

So, in this technique, the process of self-surrender is deliberately limited to a day by day, hour by hour objective. The steps encourage the penitent to remember his helplessness before God even while surrendering his life to God's grace. There are techniques of evangelization which have not emphasized sufficiently that, even after surrender to the grace of God, man is still, in himself, as helpless as a sail without wind and entirely dependent on hourly supplies of grace. The "I can now, once and for all, do all things" attitude is so exaggerated that the convert either lapses in a few weeks into a seemingly despair, or else develops those spiritual sins associated with the religion of eros.

The second technique is based on the assumption that the command to love our neighbours as ourselves is also a therapeutic principle of the soul rather than an arbitrary injunction of the law. Having found hope in a daily programme of grace receiving, he is encouraged to share his hope in a daily programme of love outpouring—to save himself by losing himself. A mark of devil-possession, common to the leopard man in Africa or the addict in England, is a sense of inner isolation from others. The alcoholic drinks secretly from his secret supplies and projects his own shame for his lost control upon others with a pattern of fantasies and rationalizations which makes it extremely difficult for anyone to understand or assess him by normal criteria. So the holding power of "A.A." lies in a fellowship which compares in its strength with the *koinonia* of the primitive Church. Not only is his isolation discouraged by the understanding friendship of every member of the group, he is given a sponsor who will be available to answer every call of his need and whose dedication to his "Twelfth-Step" work may be marked by the newly-installed telephone at his bedside.

The strength of this fellowship is reminiscent of that of the early Methodist Society which would make the greatest sinner of the village a target for prayer and elect a leader as its agent in establishing contact with the target. Response to the "A.A." fellowship is often marked by a "transference phenomenon" of great intensity. Having found hope in association with the group, the addict will break out of his isolation with a vengeance and besiege his sponsor with visits and telephone calls, and, such is the sensitiveness of his appeal, that the sponsor must be prepared, however inconvenient it may be, to give the caller the impression that he is the only person in the world who counts and that time is no object. An alcoholic's "opening-up" may lead to some very intimate confessions which only a group may be able to carry. Sometimes when such confessions have been made in personal confidence to a doctor or a minister, the alcoholic has developed a resentment against the man to whom he has confessed, simply because he now feels in his power. In fact, there are three stages in recovery, at each of which the help of the group is invaluable. The stages were described with prophetic insight by Isaiah when he spoke of those who "shall mount up with wings as eagles; shall run and not be weary; shall walk and not faint". The first stage has been called the "honeymoon phase" when the alcoholic feels such a renewal of health and good spirits that he becomes over-confident and inclined to play with temptation, and here the experience of the group is directed to sober him. Then comes the "depressed phase" when, still anxious to do everything at once, he is in too much of a hurry to regain all that he has lost and becomes discouraged at having to start again with a subordinate position at work or an "on trial" atmosphere at home, and during this phase the experience of the group encourages him. Finally comes the phase when he is able to take life steadily with a sober view of his social resources and responsibilities, and the group offers him the opportunity of working in it for the good of others as his own vocation in life.

The relevance of this outline to all who face the stresses and strains

of modern life with an inner sense of inadequacy, anxiety or foreboding is obvious. It is a programme of life which can well be adopted by all who, realizing that they are on a battle-field between spiritual hosts of light and of darkness, know they are helpless without the help of God. Its relevance to compulsive behaviour generally is also as obvious as its similarity to the teaching of the saints in regard to compulsive "cleavage" between willing and doing in devotional exercises. Speaking of the alien thoughts and imaginings which seem to grow all the stronger by one's attempt to resist them, Dr. O'Riordan sums up the advice of the saints thus, "Do not try to get rid of these things directly. Rather take advantage of them to confess your powerlessness before God: surrender yourself into His keeping with all readiness to accept whatever sacrifices He may ask of you, whatever duties He may lay on you: commit yourself entirely to the care of your loving and merciful Father in Heaven—and all will be well."

Its relevance also to modern psychological research into the sources of compulsive behaviour in the sub-conscious mind, related to the compulsive power of the dissociated idea, is also significant. To bring one's inner helplessness entirely before a gracious Heavenly Father, rather than to push the alien longing into the sub-conscious mind whence its instinctive power emerges in a twisted compulsive attitude, clearly offers better hope of a unified personality. Perhaps the penitent acknowledgment of our helplessness before God is the one cleanly unifying force in human personality, and the steps which follow, as the day the night, to live humbly by the daily grace of God, form the only way to that unity of personality which is Christian freedom.

One thing certainly is recognized by the great majority of those physicians who have begun to specialize in the treatment of alcoholism, that, as the words "addict" and "dedicated" spring from the same root, so both addict and Christian are specially bound together in the bundle of life, for the addict's only hope of permanent recovery lies in the grace of God mediated through the Christian fellowship. So, while one appreciates the aim of "Alcoholics Anonymous" to embrace alcoholics universally, whatever may be their conception of God, nevertheless its redemptive power is due to the fact that it is an expression of the religion of agape—the response, as revealed uniquely in Christ Jesus, of God's grace to human helplessness.
