Twelve Step Addiction Recovery Groups: An American Religious Movement

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Abstract/Description
This dissertation argues that Twelve Step addiction recovery groups, modelled on Alcoholics Anonymous, are an American religious movement, deserving a place in American religion scholarship.

Chapter one argues that Twelve step groups are not a religious "institution," but a social movement, working for recovery from addiction. Secondarily and functionally they constitute a religious movement, working for change in the way people experience spiritual life.

Chapter Two shows that the original Twelve Step fellowship, Alcoholics Anonymous, developed a methodology for overcoming addiction to alcohol which they described as a "spiritual way of life." Chapter Three shows that AA borrowed methods and language from two religious traditions of the early twentieth century: the Oxford Group, a conservative Christian renewal movement and New Thought, a mystical movement affirming "spirituality" over "religion." Twelve Step thought was also heavily influenced by Harvard philosopher William James and medical theories of Alcoholism.

Chapter Four shows how the patterns of AA are sacralized and ritualized to apply to other addictions. The chapter charts the development of Al-Anon, Codependents Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous, Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous, and Fundamentalists Anonymous, and considers other Twelve Step developments.

Chapter Five discusses theological beliefs important to the movement. Chapter Six describes the movement as a mystical fellowship with sectarian tendencies, seeking transformation of the self--not the world; synthesizing the best in culture with the revelations of the Higher Poer.

Chapter Seven discusses the movement's impact on religious institutions and the larger culture. I argue that the movement is attractive to many because it answers the search for community, spirituality and freedom in a way that affirms modern values of pluralism, inductive logic and shared authority. Twelve Step recovery is an intentionally created religious movement, primarily designed to resolve the problem of addiction. In the process, it provides a religious experience that maintains continuity between America's sectarian past and pluralistic future.

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Twelve-step programs are mutual aid organizations for the purpose of recovery from substance addictions, behavioral addictions and compulsions. Developed in the 1930s, the first twelve-step program, Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), aided its membership to overcome alcoholism. Since that time dozens of other organizations have been derived from AA's approach to address problems as varied as drug addiction, compulsive gambling and overeating. All twelve-step programs utilize a version of AA's suggested twelve...