

John C. An Atheist AA in Paris Podcast Transcript

00:15 John S: Hello and welcome to AA Beyond Belief, the Podcast, I'm your host John S. Today we meet John C, a member of the board of WAAFT IAAC who lives in Paris, France. We'll have a free flowing conversation about atheism, AA, the upcoming convention in Austin, just a little bit of everything. Hey John, how are you doing?

00:35 John C: Hi John, good to hear you. It's good to see you.

00:39 JS: I'm glad that we're finally able to do this. We've been talking about doing this for a long time.

00:43 JC: Yeah you're right. The convention in Austin is coming along really well, I'm really, really pleased with how things are panning out there and so yeah, I think now is a good time.

00:53 JS: Yep. I was listening to your talk yesterday that you gave in Santa Monica. I missed that when I was out there because I got there, I got there Friday afternoon, I can't remember when I got there, but I missed the fellowship speakers so I'm glad I listened to the tape. But I did not realize that you were the one who suggested the second A in WAAFT IAAC.

01:15 JC: Yeah, I guess I really came out as an atheist in that conference in a big way, but really I had not at all planned that, but it just kind of popped into my head. A lot of the meetings are called agnostics meetings, but as an atheist, I think it was important that atheists are also included in the name. After that I also made a motion (I think I surprised some of the people there), that we actually change the name of the organization, just put in the other A for atheist.

02:01 JS: I was there for that.

02:02 JC: We Agnostic, Atheists.

02:03 JS: I was there for that at the business meeting and I'm glad that you did that because it always bugged me too. I'm an atheist, I'm a total atheist and it bugged me too, but I never would have said anything, I never would have thought to say anything about it. I figured, "Oh what the hell, it's just one A", but it deserves to be in there.

02:21 JC: I've lived in France for almost 25 years now and in France if someone says, "Je suis athée", I'm an atheist, it doesn't... A lot of people would say that, or I'm a non-believer would be another way to say that, and it really does not have a particularly negative connotation here.

But what I've noticed is in the states or in North America, if you really come out and say, "I'm an atheist," whether it's in AA meetings or outside of AA meetings, you're not going to get a lot of really positive feedback like, "Oh gee, that's great or whatever." And I think that's because as young children, we learn, at least what I learned as a young kid growing up in Texas was God is good and if you're going to be good, you're going to follow God. And people who love God are the really good people. And on the flip side of that, if you're not a believer, that somehow freaks

people really out.

03:30 JC: In America you're given a lot of freedom to be Episcopalian, or a Methodist, or a Baptist, or whatever, or a Catholic, and maybe even some sort of alternative religions and especially I think spirituality has somehow become the new religion. But if you really come out and say, "I'm an atheist," atheists are pretty hated.

I remember Madalyn Murray O'Hair. I went to hear her speak once when I was in university and she was really hated. In the end she had a horrible death, but she was the most hated woman in America. I think they described her as that at one point in time.

I think that dynamic somehow also pushes into AA, and so if people say, if you really say... And for me, I'm also very out as an atheist and I guess I tend to be a pretty... I don't want to be the in people's face particularly about it, but I also don't want to think it's necessary to hide it.

04:33 JS: No, me too.

04:34 JC: And I also said I think now somehow it's like... and also being gay, I think what we've seen this past year with Caitlyn Jenner and things like that, is all the transsexuals coming out and so I think the atheists somehow are the transsexuals of the agnostic community, or the secular community of AA, or whatever you want to call it.

04:53 JS: Yeah. Well I tell you what, for me, I never really believed in God, I honestly don't think I did. I may have been somewhat deluded but I was never a religious person. But when I really came to the conclusion that I'm atheist, the first time I heard someone refer to me as an atheist, it bothered me, but now I'm completely comfortable with the word. So yeah, in the United States, you just kind of grow up with that being a negative word. It's almost like they attach some political meaning to it. And actually it's nothing other than I just don't believe in a deity, that's it, period.

05:23 JC: Right.

05:24 JS: So anyway, I'm glad that you did that because it does belong there. And as we move on in this movement, this secular AA movement, I do kind of hope that we remember the atheist because when we have new people come to our meeting, that's how most of them identify to tell you the truth, but anyway I digressed.

05:43 JC: Yeah, yeah. So in Austin, there definitely will be... I think it's the first day, there is a panel called 'Afternoon with the atheists' and I will be speaking on that panel, and there'll be John H. from Washington and several others...

06:00 JS: Yeah.

06:01 JC: Well, we'll be talking about what it's like to be an atheist in AA, and for me the goal of the convention in Santa Monica is... And especially in a place like Texas, where I said I grew up, Austin is definitely the San Francisco of Texas, so it's by far and away the most liberal part, but

in meetings... And you're in the Midwest, so I'm sure if you go to normal meetings and you say you're an atheist, you're going to get a reaction.

06:30 JS: Oh yeah.

06:31 JC: You're going to get a reaction which is not at all positive.

06:34 JS: Well, AA especially because in AA, I'm going against their belief that only a God can save us.

06:42 JC: Yeah, exactly. It's considered going against the program. And you touched on this because I listened to your interview of last week with Jerry. You touched on this, I think you said people who are, for lack of a better term I'd say, "Fundamentalist AA people," they say something like this. I remember coming out as an atheist in a meeting and somebody said, "You're probably not an alcoholic, because if you're a real alcoholic, you have to have the spiritual experience or you wouldn't get better, so you're probably just a heavy drinker. [chuckle] Why don't you just go back out and drink?" And I was shocked the first time I heard that. [chuckle] It can be tough sometimes for...

07:38 JS: Yeah. So that panel would address that difficulty that people have in the rooms then? Because I do think that there's...

07:48 JC: I think I'll address it in my talk and... Yeah. If I look at the history of AA, atheists have always been in AA. There was the famous one, was it Effey or Elley? I forget his name, [chuckle] the very first one where the kind of story was, "Well he did finally find God at the end," or something, I don't remember exactly, but in any event, today I think it's important that people who are non-believers are not turned away by too much religiosity.

And the thing which concerns me the most is because what a lot of fundamentalists in AA do, is they apply something which fundamentalist Christians do, which is the following, "If you don't believe in the four spiritual laws," I think the Baptists say or the... "If you don't accept Jesus Christ as your savior," and these other things then you're going to go to hell, and you're going to have an eternity of torment. And the fundamentalists in AA, they just move a slight step away from that, and say, "Well, if you don't do this according to the first 164 pages of this book, which means you have to do this and that, and everything else, then you're going to drink again." In which for people who are believers it's not such of a problem, but people who are not believers they're going to be completely turned off by that, and they may not stick around just because they feel forced into a specific belief.

09:22 JC: And I don't think that was really the intent of the founders of AA, and it's... Certainly in WAAFT, in We Agnostics, Atheists and Free Thinkers groups, in secular groups, we want to get people away from that, we want to be more accepting to people who do not want to believe, who do not believe. Or maybe have doubts, or maybe don't believe like the Buddhists. In some non-theistic Buddhists they don't believe in an intervening God, maybe they believe in something else, so I think AA and the steps what they said then were the suggested steps, they are suggestions.

10:03 JS: Yeah, they are.

[chuckle]

10:05 JC: They're not the 10 commandments again that if you don't follow them you're gonna go to hell.

10:10 JS: Right. Yeah. And we actually talk about the steps sometimes at our meetings, and sometimes I do a little caveat before I talk about them. I say, "Now listen, just because you don't do these does not mean you're going to be doomed to drunkenness and death. It does not mean that. You are free to do or not do this however you wish." Because around here unfortunately the regular meetings, they preach these steps like, "You do these or you die," it's a do or die situation, and that puts a lot of pressure on people. It makes people feel guilty. They're feeling like crap because they're not doing the steps right, blah blah blah. I really hate it. But I love the steps. I just don't like the pressure that is put on people about the steps. Just do them or don't do them, whatever you want. I do see some benefit to them, but they're not... I don't see them as essential.

11:00 JC: I think there's also somehow some issue of semantics. I think there's nothing magical... I think the steps have good principles and there are a lot of good things in them. For me the thing that continually comes up that I think also one of the main things in AA is to be able to admit that, "I was wrong, I was wrong in the fact that I didn't accept that I was an... I was just in error," or maybe wrong or something, "I was mistaken, and I'm frequently mistaken, I continue to be mistaken, so when I first got to AA I was in complete denial. I didn't want to believe that, in spite of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, I didn't want to believe that I was an alcoholic and a drug addict, and I wanted to try somehow and control what I was using, whether it was... Like, "Okay, I won't use cocaine now and I won't drink, but I still want to smoke marijuana, or whatever it was." And then when I did come... And fortunately, I was young when I got to the rooms. When I did come to the realization that, "Okay, I really can't use any mind-altering substance in any kind of success, and then if I do that it is characterized as an illness or a disease, whatever you want to call it, and a progressive illness, that I will definitely go downhill all the way and it could be very quickly."

12:34 JS: Yeah, you also mentioned in your talk that that admission, that when you finally say I'm an alcoholic, that that was kind of a freeing experience for you.

12:46 JC: I remember when I went to my first meeting. I said I'm an alcoholic, and I did have a feeling that okay... I didn't want at that point to... I didn't understand what that actually meant and I did drink again, and used drugs again after that point. What I wanted to think anyway was that if I had a certain period of abstinence that I could supposedly drink in a normal way and to quote the Big Book, Chapter Three, the persistence of that illusion, and I've seen it here in Paris; I've lived here, like I said, for 25 years. And this past year we had three people who were continually in and out of the program in English-speaking AA here who died. One of a heroin overdose, one of suicide, and one really of alcoholism. And so, it is a serious illness and it is cunning, baffling, and powerful.

13:45 JC: So I think there's a lot of truth in the Big Book and the steps, but I think everyone has to determine what's true and what's evolved, and what's... Again, not take let's say a Baptist version of the Big Book, which I mean to make a comparison again, a lot of people in AA they're like the Baptists of AA so that every word in the Big Book is absolutely God's revealed truth to the alcoholic and I just...

14:20 JS: Right. And you said in your talk in Santa Monica, you said, "Why do we have a book and why do we have to study this book like it's the Bible?" I wish I would've heard that talk back then. I needed to hear it back then because I wasn't hearing that kind of stuff. I was fairly new to being an atheist in AA at that time in Santa Monica. But I've kind of come to that conclusion too. Damn it, I don't know what to say about this damn Big Book. We actually put an article out about it today. There's a lot of value to that book but I've had it used against me. I've had people attack me with the goddamn book, people that sat in meetings with me for 25 years but when I started singing a different tune they didn't like it. And so, I don't know. I have a hard time with it but it's not the book itself, it's the way that people revere the book and treat the book as if it's holy and it was never intended to be that. That hurts people.

15:13 JC: Exactly. That's exactly right, and since it was written there'd been a lot of things written about alcoholism, some better than others and actually sometimes I think for me even when I first started, the part I like best about the book were the stories of the people in the back because it seemed to be much more understandable. One of the latest things I read is... Actually, one of the first things that I read when I got sober was this book by Carrie Fisher, *Postcards From The Edge* because I got sober in 1986. And she's written subsequent books and they're quite funny and stuff like that. It's tongue-in-cheek stuff. One saying which I always remember is, "I don't have to like AA, I just have to go", because I really think for me that going and being involved with sober people, I think that is what has enabled me to have long-term sobriety, and I noticed that people who do not frequent the meetings too much, they're the ones who tend to go back out and drink again or drug again.

16:23 JC: So that's why I really try, and especially if I'm going through a difficult time that just to double up on meetings and have more contact with sober people because it would be so easy to pick up a drink even for me after 30 years, or drug or whatever because it's very, very... Alcohol is omnipresent in our society. I was in Seattle for three weeks this year and now cannabis has been completely decriminalized there and they're selling it in shops so that reminded me of Amsterdam since years. But alcohol and drugs are quite easy to obtain.

17:04 JS: Is it different socially in Europe if you're out with people? I know that wine is, what? They drink it all the time, right? I'm assuming.

17:12 JC: Yeah, sure. The Germans drink beer, the French drink wine. Yeah, absolutely. I do work in business and it's unusual to refuse a wine. It's unusual. In North America, I think it's a bit... People are more used to it, but people are also... France in a lot of ways, in some social things tends to run 10 or 15 years behind. So there is a much longer social conscience about alcoholism. AA in France is very, very well represented. Just in the Paris area, I think there are probably 50 meetings a week in French and in English in Paris we have over 40 meetings. It's like cosmopolitan place.

17:52 JS: 40 English-speaking meetings?

17:54 JC: Yeah, we do because... There are people from all over the world here plus Paris... I think it still is even after all the terrorist attacks... Paris is the capital of tourism. It's probably the number one spot for tourists around the world. And so, there are always tourists in our meetings, as well.

18:13 JS: Yeah. And you've got some agnostic meetings there that you started.

18:18 JC: Yeah, we do. It's from a long time. So, really, the story of agnostic meetings are, I went to an agnostic meeting in New York City. I think it's the one on Sunday in the Gay and Lesbian center, and I was really... I really liked it. And I don't know if you know that meeting at all there, but it is very, very, very hardcore atheists.

18:40 JS: Really? I'm going to go next time I'm in New York.

18:40 JC: Some even more hardcore than me. Yeah, yeah, yeah. And it was kind of that radical Greenwich Village left atheist, ex-Jewish left, or whatever. And very, very good meetings. I really liked those. And so, I came back here. I just took the format, and we started a meeting. I think it's been about 18 years ago. And at first, it was quite slow to get off the ground. I'd say there were probably five or six of us who were regulars, but ever since, once it took off, it's a long running meeting, and we have, I'd say, an average of 15 people at the meeting, and that was the first one. Subsequent to that, someone else founded an agnostic meditation meeting, so...

19:26 JS: You talked about that, yeah.

19:27 JC: Yeah, that's not a meeting that I go to. I have a bit of difficulty sitting in a dark room, listening to meditation tapes with people. But they like that. And two years ago, we started a free thinkers meeting. Using a little bit different format, what we do, what it's evolved into. First we would read either AA literature... We would read one week AA literature, and the second week, we would read non AA literature. Anything! So, people read poems, and a lot of stuff that came off AA Agnostica and Beyond Belief, as well. So, stuff that people have written on there, we'd read that and then discuss that.

20:08 JC: Actually, what it's evolved into now, because that was a bit difficult, because the leader then had to print something up and then for every meeting... That was a bit laborious. But now, we use Joe C's agnostic meditation book every week. And some person reads that, and then we just go around the room and share. I was also afraid, again, that that meeting wouldn't take off. Because in the beginning, there were three, four, five people, and now we have a few regulars, and it's one of the most interesting meetings in Paris. Because the interesting thing is, that when you say it's a freethinkers meeting, your average person does not really know what that means.

20:52 JS: No.

20:53 JC: So, we get a huge mix, and you know, we've had Back to Basics people there, they were a bit infuriated. We've also had... I remember at least one time that I was there, when we read the agnostic format, and then someone started sharing. Someone else was quite offended, and actually left the meeting. [laughter] But you know, it does give for an interesting mix every single week. So, yeah. It's been cool.

21:25 JS: That's how we do our meetings. We don't ever read AA literature, except for *Living Sober*. But the other books... It doesn't work for us. It just doesn't work for us.

21:33 JC: Right. I think it can be interesting to read AA literature, and have people really give an honest opinion, "Do I believe that or not?" Or, "What are they saying here?" Instead of just repeating what it says. If you go to a Big Book study in most places, it's not a critical evaluation of the text. It's just that it is definitely the truth, and what does this sentence mean? Or something. But I've been... And actually, there's some meetings in Austin which Nick heads up, where Nick was one of the main people... The meetings are called, "Children of Chaos". I think that's also a line in the Big Book somewhere, I don't know where. And the Children of Chaos, they actually do use... I think they read the Big Book one meeting every... It's a daily new meeting, an agnostics meeting, but they read out of the Big Book one day, and the 12 and 12 another day, and then they have speakers there. And you do get people who say, well, you know, this is... It is a human power, for example, let's just... Stuff like that.

22:38 JS: Who came up with that for the convention? That human power can relieve our alcoholism? I like it!

22:47 JC: That was actually myself, and I think it was...

22:50 JS: Really? Congratulations!

22:51 JC: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[laughter]

22:53 JC: So, somebody had the... I think they started it as, "May you find us now." And then I added on the bit, "Human power can relieve our alcoholism." You know?

23:03 JS: I love it.

23:04 JC: And I think some people, it was a bit controversial, but I was surprised that it went through without...

23:10 JS: It was brilliant.

23:11 JC: It went through without hardly any trouble at all.

23:13 JS: It was brilliant. Again, I didn't really appreciate it when I first saw it. When I first saw it, I thought, "Hmm. I wonder how it's going to go in Kansas City?" And I'll tell you how it went

in Kansas City. It raised some eyebrows. Here's what happened. They did put our flyer out, they gave it to all the groups, they put it on their website, they're very, very nice to us about it. But when they presented the flyer to all the AA groups, they gave this little warning. "Every group is autonomous. You can display this at your meeting hall or not. It is up to your group." And I was a little offended by that. I thought, "Wait a second, you didn't do this to... "

23:53 JC: That was the first time they did that, right?

23:55 JS: Yeah. It's like, "Wait a second. You don't go around telling groups that they have a right to hang a flyer, or trash a flyer. So I sent off an email to the Central Office Director, I do like her a lot, she's a sweet lady, and she's a wonderful person, so nothing against her. But she said, "Well John, some people felt like you were violating the ABCs," the ABCs you know from How it Works?

24:15 JC: Of course, which is, yeah that's where it came from, yeah.

24:18 JS: And I thought, "Well hell I didn't think you could violate them", [laughter] how can you violate them?

24:22 JC: That would be like no human power could relieve your alcoholism that God [24:27] , yes.

24:27 JS: It was a good thing, but at our last Tuesday night meeting, a guy came from a group outside the city, a small-town group, and he brought the flyer with him and he pointed to that line and he smiled. Because it just made him feel like, "Yes", that is what does it, it's human power that does it!

24:49 JC: Yeah, Okay.

24:49 JS: And we should stand our ground, yeah, hell yeah, that's what we believe, there's nothing wrong with that. And there's nothing contrary to AA about that either.

24:57 JC: I don't think so, I don't think that part of the book... Again, some people do think that, they do believe that. So, but it says in one of the other books somewhere says, "AA does not require that you believe anything", maybe in the 12 and 12.. So good, if we don't have to believe it, then let us believe what we want.

25:17 JS: God is either everything or he's nothing, Okay.

25:19 JC: Oh yeah, that's another one, that's the other one. Yeah, that really gets thrown out a lot. And when people throw that back out at me, then I go back to them and I say, "Well for me God is nothing, because I don't believe in God."

25:30 JS: Right, right.

25:31 JC: And wow, you look at people's faces when you say that, that really kind of shocks

them.

25:37 JS: Yeah, yeah. It's actually been kind of good for me in a way because I'm actually kind of an introverted person, but being an atheist in Missouri sometimes, it kind of [chuckle] emboldens you to be a little more outspoken about it, especially in AA. But I don't necessarily, John, I don't have to deal with it, because we have so many agnostic meetings down here that I don't really go to regular meetings. But I do deal with it in general service, because I'm involved with the District and the Area Assembly and stuff like that, and that's where I deal with it. That's where I have to deal with the people that want to pray at the end of every meeting and everything, so...

26:17 JC: Right, yeah, I do go to a lot of regular meetings because, of course, depending on where I travel... I travel to Asia quite often, to Japan and China, and I was in South America a few weeks ago. So I don't really have the luxury of always going to agnostic meetings.

26:38 JS: Right.

26:38 JC: And I don't always have to come out as an atheist, but it does come up I'd say fairly frequently. And but also even in Paris, I'll go to almost any of the meetings here. My latest thing I've been going to is I've been going to a bit more of the NA meetings because there's one right in my neighborhood and I'd been going to a meeting on Sunday where there isn't an agnostic meeting here... Going to a meeting that tends to attract a fundamentalist crowd. And I don't know why but I did mention at one of those meetings [chuckle] that I was an atheist and then at the end they asked me to say the prayer. So I just declined, and that's another thing, is that in a normal meeting, I will definitely hold hands with the people, but I don't see the need to repeat the prayer.

27:31 JS: No, I don't either.

27:33 JC: And if somebody asks me to say the prayer, I just say no thanks and that always surprises people as well.

27:40 JS: Yeah, I won't ever pray with them again. At the last, I guess I should be careful about what I say, but no one around here listens to this podcast anyway. But anyway, when I was at the last Area Assembly, I had this motion before the Assembly about how I wanted the General Service Conference to recommend to GSO that any time an agnostic group approaches a central office to be listed that the central office always be unambiguous and agree to list the group. Well there was a lot of discussion about this, and one of the people who came to the microphone to discuss it said that, "No," and this is really interesting, they mentioned Austin by the way. She said, "No, I was familiar with these groups in Austin, and one of those groups affiliated itself with a religion. And so you have to be really, really careful." I didn't know what the hell she was talking about.

28:30 JC: Well that's an interesting point, that's a really interesting point. Because in Austin you have one of the freakiest meetings I've ever...

28:39 JS: That's what I was thinking, the Dharma meeting?

28:41 JC: Well no, there were actually two, there was one called Dharma of Recovery [laughter] and then there was... I forget what's the other term...

28:48 JS: So you know what she was talking about?

28:49 JC: Yeah, I do know what she's talking about. The one that I've been to a few times, it's gotten a bit too much for me at that meeting. But it's a meeting, and I think it's on Sunday afternoon, and it's in the Buddhist temple in Austin which was a converted 20s house, and it's in the sanctuary or whatever where there's a big Buddha there and the meeting is on the... Everyone sits on the floor on cushions. And there was 10 or 15 minutes of silence, and then they read something from some kind of Buddhist [laughter] literature, which I didn't have any idea what they were talking about. But I guess if they want to have it like that, it was okay and I remember the first time I went they chanted the serenity prayer without the word God three times. And then the next time I went, that was when I decided it was getting a bit too much for me...

29:51 JS: Yeah, see I don't like that kind of stuff, I don't like the... [chuckle]

29:54 JC: The next time I went they were bowing to each other. And it just seemed to me, it's just too off-the-wall.

[laughter]

30:04 JS: Okay.

30:05 JC: But again, more power to...

30:06 JS: That's right. They have the right to do that.

30:06 JC: If that's what they want to do, they should be able to do it. Yeah.

30:09 JS: Anyway, this girl, she said, "Oh, they're affiliated..." But you know what they all did afterwards? They all closed with The Lord's Prayer, and the people who said, "So wait a second, who's affiliated with a religion here?" These people... So I was a little ticked off and so I won't ever pray with them again.

30:21 JC: Yeah. I have to say also, I would have been much less tolerant of the meeting if they had read a Christian meditation book or something like that. I probably wouldn't have stayed for the meeting. But since it's so exotic, and actually in Japan I was talking to some people because Buddhism is also a religion and it's also a very strict and very... In Asia, it can be as constraining as some forms of Christianity can here. The more fundamentalist you get in any religion, for me, the worse it is. So I was talking to a person there who said that Buddhism is not as open or whatever as people in the west would like to think it is.

31:03 JS: Yeah. Isn't that funny? Because, yeah, it seems to be popular in agnostic AA. In our group, there's a couple of people who read the Buddhist 12-step books and talk about the

Buddhism and everything, but often say, "Oh, this isn't a religion at all."

31:22 JC: Right. But I also want to say that in Austin, we've tried to be welcoming also to Buddhists because there is a large Buddhist community there, and if they want to be part of our convention they're welcome. And there is at least one Buddhism panel and probably two if it makes it. There's one specifically with the title Buddhism in it, and I think there's another one called 'All is Clouded by Desire' or something like that which is a Buddhist principle, something like that.

31:54 JS: Right. Well, I think that's fine. I've learned a lot of good stuff from it. We used to do some meditation here in Kansas City, and I actually read some... I think it was Jack Kornfield wrote a book kind of based on Buddhist principles, and it was actually kind of helpful for me. But yeah, anyway...

32:13 JC: Well, there are a couple of famous books. I read them at one time. I couldn't tell you what they're about now, but there are a couple of recovery books with, yeah, with definite, or maybe several now, with a definite slant on Buddhism. So yeah, I think it's...

32:29 JS: So what it's like, John? You've been to the meetings in Japan, AA meetings in Japan?

32:33 JC: I have, yes.

32:34 JS: What are those like? Are they much different?

32:36 JC: Well, I've been to the English-speaking meetings because I don't speak Japanese. But they have a very eclectic crowd there. And they do have an agnostics meeting there as well.

32:46 JS: Yes, I know that.

32:47 JC: And I was hoping that a friend of mine was going be able to come to the convention. He had originally intended to, but I think he's gotten a new job and he won't be able to. But they also...

33:00 JS: Does he go to the Japanese group? Does he go to that group in [33:02] ?

33:02 JC: It's Christopher, and Christopher speaks fluent Japanese and he's married to a Japanese woman. But I don't know if he goes to Japanese AA. I think he has gone to Japanese AA as well. But there's also, I think what he said about Japanese AAs is that they also, they take a very liberal whatever approach on the word god and they don't really... The way it's being translated was quite liberal or whatever with the concept of god anyway.

33:35 JS: Right, right. Well, the reason I was asking about that is that I wanted to do some podcasts of agnostic meetings from around the world.

33:45 JC: Oh, well, I'll definitely put you in contact with Christopher.

33:48 JS: That'd be cool.

33:49 JC: And he actually just did a very, very interesting podcast on sexuality in Japan and I can send you that link. And so I'm sure he would love to do a podcast with you.

34:01 JS: Well, that'd be really cool. That way, we got Japan, Australia, the UK, Canada, France now.

34:07 JC: Yeah, absolutely. And London, they also have quite a strong group there. I've been to [34:13] on Thursday nights. They have a very strong agnostics group there. It's very good. But they have also other ones that I haven't been to, so yeah.

34:22 JS: Well, I'm pretty excited about this and I'm looking forward to the thing in Austin. I don't know if you noticed, but after the Santa Monica convention, I think there were well over 100 new agnostic meetings that started after that convention in the last couple of years.

34:40 JC: Oh, I had no idea. That's great. That's really, really great. And that's what I hope will also be the momentum after Austin is that... And they'll also be... There's one panel on, how do you start a secular meeting? Some people won't know, and so people who have actually done that will be leading that panel. And there'll also be some interesting discussions, because there is definitely, in certain parts of the world, and surprisingly enough Canada seems to be one, where the agnostic groups are not listed and you have very... Now, there's this lawsuit with Canadian Board of Human Rights. There'll be a special panel on that.

35:25 JS: That will be very interesting.

35:26 JC: The person who actually had filed the lawsuit should be in Austin and he'll be giving an update on that. I think interestingly enough, the defense of the Intergroup as being that in fact AA is a religion, and religion should be exempt from the requirement that a group should be able to have a meeting without any regard to faith or lack of it.

35:54 JS: Yeah. I think they fired...

35:54 JC: So it will be very, very interesting.

35:55 JS: They fired their original lawyers I think, and now they're trying a different defense but I don't know how you can just back out of one defense and throw out another one but I'm not a lawyer, so I don't know.

36:07 JC: Yeah, yeah but I think it's important. In some places they don't read any non-AA literature. In our agnostics group in Paris, we actually do read a version of the agnostic 12 steps.

36:22 JS: Really?

36:23 JC: And other than there was one member in the original group who was opposed to that and she decided because of that she wouldn't come to the meeting anymore, we've had absolutely

no push back at all from the Intergroup here, even though we read the agnostic 12 steps in the meeting.

36:42 JS: That's really interesting. We don't do that. We don't read anything, we just read the AA preamble and we read the agnostic preamble. We don't read the steps. In fact, we have the regular 12 steps displayed in our meeting and we just leave it up to individuals to interpret the steps however they want to, if they want to. But we never read from AA literature, but we always read from either Joe's book, we read from the Alternative 12 Steps book, we always read something... Sometimes we read from songs and different things like that.

37:11 JC: Yeah, that's cool, that's good.

37:13 JS: Yeah, but that's the thing about the convention, I think is the most important thing, is that more groups will come, more meetings will come out of it, and I think that what we're doing and the secular AA movement, I guess if you want to call it that, is we truly are reaching out to people outside of Alcoholics Anonymous. People who aren't getting help in AA, who are in fact staying away from AA, are coming to our meetings. At least that's what I find here is people say, they specifically seek out an agnostic secular meeting. So we're helping, we're helping people, and that's really important.

37:52 JC: Absolutely. We have a lot of newcomers who come to the agnostic meeting. A lot of them come to their first meeting because they see... A lot of people who come to AA at first, they don't want that, they don't want or they've been to a religious meeting or they've had some bad experience with religion in the past, so they'll come to our meeting as their first meeting, and that's been very heartening to see. And I think again we want to make AA more open to everybody and also for the people, when they do come to a meeting, like I said for myself, I'm often when I go to none agnostic, to regular AA meetings, and I say, I'm an atheist even if there's a lot of push back in the main part of the meeting, quite often I've had the experience of people will come up to me afterward and will say, "Thank you so much for saying that, thank you because I feel pretty much the same way, but I've been sober for six months or a year and of course I don't really feel comfortable saying that because of the feedback that I'll get."

38:58 JC: So yeah, I also think, for me it's important that part of the honesty of open-mindedness is in willingness. It's also having the honesty. It can be a bit tricky when we go to those meetings. And I think we also have... There'll also be a panel on, what to do and how do we express what we express when we do go to those regular meetings. How can I do that, not in a way which tries to cut down what the other people are saying but just to express my truth.

39:36 JS: Right, yeah.

39:37 JC: And that can be a bit tricky sometimes.

39:39 JS: It can be very, very tricky. I did an interview with a woman from a treatment center in California who's going to do an article and she was using me as a source for how to be an atheist in AA. And it was really hard to convey to her how difficult that it can be. Because she was looking from the perspective of people coming out of treatment, and how do they deal with an

Alcoholics Anonymous meeting if they're a non-believer, if they're an atheist. And yeah, it really kind of depends upon the person and how comfortable they are dealing with being an atheist in a religious society, but in AA it can be even more difficult. I just said, "You know what? Just be honest about who you are and what you believe and know that you don't have to stand up and pray with everybody if you don't want to."

40:28 JC: Right, absolutely.

40:30 JS: Yeah, but as time goes on, there will be more of these secular meetings and in fact, I think it's the future of AA to be honest with you, I think that it really is.

40:40 JC: That's interesting because, there's another panel and I think Jerry may be on this one again, who you spoke to last week. There's another panel in Austin which is called the Decline of AA.

40:52 JS: Yeah, I saw that. I was wondering about that.

40:54 JC: Right, if you look at the statistics, the membership in AA actually plateaued and has been declining now. For how many, and I don't really know the statistic but that's what... Jerry, who I'm sure does, because he's very up on that kind of stuff. He is going to talk about that. And that's another reason for secular meetings because if you see young people today, they're certainly much less religious than their generation of their parents. And so if they go into a meeting and it's all about higher power and getting on your knees. The first experience of going to a meeting and people saying my higher power, expressions like that.

41:47 JS: It's weird.

41:48 JC: Only in AA do you hear that kind of expression.

41:49 JS: Right, it's weird.

41:51 JC: For me it's kind of a weird, culty thing to say.

41:53 JS: It is, it is, it is weird.

41:56 JC: But it's so common, it's so common that people say that, and there are other things of course as well. So maybe that's the reason for the decline.

42:06 JS: Yeah. And I'm a broken record, but a lot of it has to do with the internet because people now can get information about Alcoholics Anonymous before they go to an AA meeting. And they get to hear about all of the stuff, about how cultish it can be, and so forth. When I went to my first AA meeting, all I knew is from what I read in Dear Abby. I didn't know anything or what I saw on the movies. So I went to that meeting, and I heard all the God talk. It was weird to me. I thought it was strange, but I just went along. I just said, "Okay, what the hell? I'm going go along and do it." But now, people don't go along. People are like, "No, that's crazy. That's nuts." And so they won't even try. So we have to reach out to those people. If we really want to help

anybody, we need to take down the barriers.

42:58 JC: Absolutely, absolutely. And there can be... It's not only religious barriers. I had a recent experience. I started going to this meeting a few months ago, and I met a young woman, a very bright British woman, and just starting out. And it was obvious that she needed some more English speaking meetings because she didn't have enough and she doesn't speak French, so I invited her to come to another meeting that I founded, which is the Living Sober meeting here. And that was actually the first, before I even went to that meeting in New York and find out about agnostic meetings. So I started a Living Sober meeting, just because I know that book was so good.

43:46 JC: And so I told her to come to that meeting, and she made the mistake of... In the meeting, she's... And it's an open meeting, which is another thing that got my [43:55] [REDACTED]. She said, "I'm an addict," and not, "I'm an alcoholic." And somebody interrupted her share and said, "This is an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting." And that really, really set me off because she was somebody who was new, and she was very, very upset, and started crying. And I was not there that day, but I found out later. So now when I go to that meeting, I don't say, "I'm an alcoholic." I say, "I'm an addict," just to see if somebody is going try and shut me up, but they haven't yet, so anyway.

44:27 JS: I'm kind of getting concerned about this. This seems to be a new phenomena in AA right now, this hyper concern about singleness of purpose. And looking at the long form of the third tradition, and being narrow about having outside issues. Someone who's an addict, whatever. It's getting crazy. I can understand what happened to that woman because I've seen it happen to a guy here. He was literally chased out of a group because he introduced himself as an addict.

45:07 JC: Yeah, that's really sad. And I think it's also interesting to notice that in the Big Book, that one story that was, "Doctor, Addict, Alcoholic," they changed the title of that story. Now, it's something else.

45:20 JS: Really?

45:21 JC: Yeah. From the third... Because actually when I got sober, it was the third edition, and...

45:26 JS: I do remember that.

45:27 JC: So there's a chapter... There was a chapter in the story's part.

45:32 JS: I remember that chapter.

45:32 JC: And it was entitled, "Doctor, Addict, Alcoholic."

45:34 JS: I remember that.

45:35 JC: Now they changed it to something else like something with acceptance or something.

45:38 JS: Isn't that interesting?

45:40 JC: Yeah.

[laughter]

45:43 JC: So it's those kinds of things. And I agree that some people in AA, and especially older people who didn't do any drugs or people... Anyway, just people who didn't do any drugs, maybe they're not going to relate to something that he says about a drug or something. But on the other hand... And AA can't be everything to everybody, so I think that's why NA exists. Because those people were rejected from AA originally. But anyway, I don't think that... And especially when we have an open meeting. I didn't really understand that. But let me also stress that Ken, our member from Australia will be leading an NA meeting, a specific NA meeting at WAAFT. So certainly, all addicts are invited as well.

46:38 JS: Absolutely.

46:38 JC: They will not be turned away from any of our meetings no matter what they share, so there you have it.

46:44 JS: Well, let's see. One other thing I want to ask you about, and this is kind of going backwards, you got sober in Austin so...

46:52 JC: No, no.

46:52 JS: No, you didn't?

46:52 JC: I started getting sober in Amarillo. I didn't grow up in Austin. I grew up in Amarillo.

46:58 JS: I know that you grew up in Amarillo, then you went to meetings in Austin. You met Charlie P, right? Is that who you meet?

47:05 JC: I did meet Charlie. And I met Charlie at... Not at an agnostics meeting, but Charlie was actually the first person that I met who actually said in a regular AA meeting, "I'm an atheist."

47:17 JS: That's right.

47:17 JC: He said that in a men's meeting, which is called, "Liar's Club" in Austin. I used to think it was a really cool meeting because it's outdoors, and it's in this kind of funky cafe. And so that's where I met Charlie, and we talked after. And yeah, I've been many times to the agnostics meetings in Austin. And there are quite a lot of them. I think there's probably 10 or 12 agnostics meetings in Austin in a week, and Charlie started those, yeah.

47:49 JS: Yeah. He started...

47:50 JC: He's a great guy.

47:51 JS: He started the first agnostics group in Los Angeles, and then he moved to Austin, and started those meetings.

48:00 JC: Exactly.

48:00 JS: Which is great, and he was a very, very nice man and very supportive.

48:04 JS: That's cool. Well, I don't know what else we want to cover. Is there anything you want to talk about, about the convention coming up? You got any news about that?

48:09 JC: Only that it's going to be a lot of fun. That Austin, if you don't know Austin, it's a really cool place. Like I said, it's the San Francisco of Texas, but there's a lot of stuff to do, and there's music, and there's also a great place to go swimming called Barton Springs, hopefully it will be warm enough. And it's really a great place and I think there's going to be... We've seen so far that the participation is going to be pretty strong so I think over 150 people have already confirmed rooms and stuff, plus they'll be locals as well. And I'm sure people... That part of Texas you have San Antonio which is not far and people will drive in from Dallas and Houston because Texans, liberal Texans, love to go to Austin.

49:00 JC: And I think you'll also... You have a lot of small towns and I think people who will have seen the thing and they're also doing quite a lot of promotion within the state. And don't forget that Texas is the second state for population in the United States, and so I think you'll have a lot of people driving in from smaller towns around. And there's even a panel on small town AA. So yeah, what we've really tried to do is have something for everyone. So there's a young people's meeting, they'll be a senior's meeting. There's a men's meeting, there's a women's meeting, there's a L... I used to think it was a gay meeting but now of course the term is LGBT. Then I thought it was LGBT but no, no. Of course now it's LGBTQ, and I don't know. I think it's... Not for sure whether the Q is queer or questioning.

49:55 JS: Questioning. [laughter]

49:55 JC: But LGBTQ meeting as well. And a Buddhist meeting as I mentioned before. Dianne Peedie is leading a meeting with a very interesting title which I forgot now but Dianne is the president and she's been very helpful and we've had a lot of fun.

50:14 JS: That will be really good, if you've listened to the... You can go on the WAAFT IAAC YouTube site and Dianne has a talk there about, I think it's called "Women in WAAFT", I think was what she did the talk on. Excellent! She's really, really good. She's a very good public speaker.

50:30 JC: Absolutely, absolutely, so we're going to have a lot of fun. And so, get everyone you know in Kansas City to come down and, from around the country and people who are listening to this. Because the conference in Santa Monica already was amazing. It was an amazing

atmosphere and it's just so nice to be with people of like mind.

50:52 JS: I think they had ultimately 300 people in Santa Monica, if I remember right, and PamW. said that we're on schedule to probably beat that. Because where we're at right now from the time until you have to the convention as far as you go hotel bookings and stuff, she says we're right on track to exceed what was going on in Santa Monica.

51:16 JC: Definitely on track. People should make their room reservations now because the hotel is filling up quite quickly. And Nick and I discussed... I think we'll have to cap out because of the space at about 450 or 500 so we're not quite there yet, and we certainly don't want to turn people away but people should try and sign up really as soon as they can now.

51:38 JS: Yep, \$99, that's not a bad rate.

51:39 JC: \$99 a night, yeah, absolutely.

51:41 JS: Well, John, thank you very much for doing this, it's been a lot of fun talking to you.

51:46 JC: Oh, it has been fun. Yeah, I've enjoyed it a lot. Look forward to seeing you in Austin.

51:50 JS: Yeah, so it'll be fun. I'm driving down with a couple people from Kansas City. I think there's going to be about five to seven of us so far, and there's probably a few other people that are still thinking about it. So last time I was the only person from Kansas City, so now I guess we're going to really increase that quite a bit this time around.

52:06 JC: Excellent. Well, if you drive down that should be fun. And I can tell you, my big tip about Texas if you have a car and you also want to spend a few extra days is go to Big Ben's National Park.

52:20 JS: Oh, okay.

52:20 JC: But that's quite a bit of a further drive. It's a very isolated... It's the largest... It's one of the largest national parks in the US and one of the least visited so look at it on a map.

52:30 JS: You know, I've never been to Texas. The only part of Texas I've ever been to is the Houston Airport.

52:36 JC: It's gonna be a long drive from Kansas City, a lot of it will be through the Great Plains so a lot of it's going to be boring. [laughter] Yeah.

52:46 JS: Alright, man. Well, you have a good time over there in Paris.

52:49 JC: Thanks, John, will do. And like I said, I look forward to seeing you soon.

52:53 JS: Alright man, thank you very much.

52:54 JC: Okay, take care. Bye bye.

52:56 JS: Well, that's it for another episode of AA Beyond Belief, the Podcast. We hope you enjoyed the program. We'll be back again next week speaking with Ben B. about Steps Six and Seven, so until then be well and take care.