

# The Names of God

## Four Major Ways in Which We Come into Contact with God in Our Lives

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### **The indispensable necessity: Truth and Honesty**

Many of the world's religions and spiritual movements insist that people must first have a conversion experience, or first have faith in certain beliefs, before they can begin walking the path to salvation. In nineteenth century American frontier revivalism, for example, people were told that they had to accept Jesus Christ on

faith as their personal Lord and Savior before they could take any other meaningful steps along the spiritual path.

The A.A. program is quite peculiar in that regard. The only thing it requires of us at the beginning is *honesty*. “Those who do not recover are people who cannot or will not completely give themselves to this simple program, usually men and women who are constitutionally incapable of being honest with themselves.”<sup>1</sup> We are not required to believe anything, or have a conversion experience, or go through any initiatory ritual like baptism or circumcision or sitting in a Native American sweat lodge. But we do have to begin seriously searching for Truth. Until people became honest with themselves, they could get nowhere.

Now when we speak of truth and honesty, we should give warning here that we are only concerned with the conscious levels of the mind, and with areas of our lives which we know we have been told to look at by the program and by our sponsors. There are forms of denial involving subconscious components, however, which will require us to spend years in the program slowly working down through “the layers of the onion.” We will need to work downward progressively through each more deeply hidden stratum of denial, raising materials to conscious awareness which we had never been truly conscious of before. In that sense, in this world and this life, we will always be blithely unaware of the existence of some things in our mental makeup, so that our goal must be progress, not perfection.

But the fundamental search for truth and honesty is in fact achievable at the conscious level of our minds, and twelve step people have to be warned that there can be no healing in their lives until they begin looking at themselves sternly, and asking themselves repeatedly the same simple question. Is what I am saying to you and to myself really true? Is the belief upon which I am basing this decision an honest description of what is really so? Acting upon the basis of ideas *which I know are not true* is

treachery to the principle of genuine honesty, but of equal importance, failure to even ask the question of truth in matters which are obviously of formative importance in my decision-making is culpable negligence that will prevent my recovery.

### **The four Names of God**

The early Christians of the first five centuries recognized that there were different names for God. We could say that God was **(1) *the glory and the holiness*** revealed in the world of nature and in sacred places, **(2) *the holy spirit*** which was present “when two or three were gathered” in the divine name, and **(3) *the good itself***. When twelve-step people refer to their higher power as the power of Nature or as the kind of feeling of the divine presence which Bill W. felt in Winchester Cathedral, or when they refer to their higher power as the spirit of the tables or as the principle of Good Orderly Direction, these words (taken in the context in which these terms are used in A.A., N.A., Al-Anon, and the other twelve step groups) are simply modern translations and adaptations of those three early Christian names of God. In terms of the doctrinal standards of orthodox Christian belief during the early centuries, the A.A. versions are all three theologically correct and completely appropriate ways of practicing God consciousness and being immediately aware of the divine presence.

And there is one additional ancient traditional name for God which is especially important, because this one explains why honesty plays such an essential role in twelve step spirituality: **(4) *God is truth itself***. We are told in the scriptures that “God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” It also gives us the solemn promise that “you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”<sup>2</sup> Augustine, the great African saint, put this idea at the very center of his thought. His spiritual and philosophical writings were the most influential source of ideas (after the New Testament itself) for all of western

Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant. Those who cannot be honest will never find the truth, and will never find the path of life.

## **1. The divine Glory and the experience of the Sacred**

Before discussing Augustine's concept in any detail, however, let us first look briefly at the other three Names of God, beginning with the idea of the glory and the holiness of God. In the Hebrew Bible, in the book of Isaiah (6:3), the prophet described a vision which he had had in King Solomon's Temple, where he saw the mighty angels who were called the Seraphim (the Burning Ones) flying about the Throne of God and singing the thrice-holy anthem:

Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts;  
the whole earth is full of his glory.

Different variations of this angelic song appear in a vast number of Jewish and Christian hymns and liturgical passages.

In this hymn we are told that God is holy (*qadosh*) and that his glory (*kabod*) fills all the earth. By the glory of God, we mean the holiness of the divine presence which shines out in all created things. When we look at the starry heavens above or at the beauty of the spring flowers and feel a sense of something infinite and majestic somehow present, we are perceiving the glory of God. When we walk through the woods and hear the birds singing and feel the soft earth under our feet, and somehow feel our souls being restored to peace and harmony, we are allowing the glory and the holiness of God to heal us spiritually. When we look through a telescope at a distant galaxy, thousands of light years away, and realize that these stars and galaxies extend out for as far as we can observe, and suddenly feel a sense of incredible awe at this extraordinary universe we live in, we are sensing what the Bible called the glory of God. When we marvel at some of the extraordinary discoveries of modern science, such as what we now know about the strange world of atoms and atomic nuclei and the

fundamental particles of which the universe is made, this sense of wonder which we feel is yet another way of sensing the glory of God.

When we are beginners in the spiritual life, let us not argue about what name to put on what we are sensing (such as whether we should call it God or Nature). The only question we should be asking at that stage is, can we *feel* the wonder and the awe and the majesty and the sense of the infinite?

Rudolf Otto, one of the two greatest Protestant theologians in the period right after the First World War, wrote a book called *The Idea of the Holy* in which he showed how the intuitive perception of what he called the holy (which he also referred to as the sacred or the numinous) lay at the basis of all the world's religions. It was a kind of feeling (German *Gefühl*), a kind of immediate awareness (Greek *aisthêsis*), an intuitive knowledge (German *Ahnung*) which was in some ways more like an aesthetic sense. It was of fundamental importance to note that it was not an intellectualized concept (German *Begriff*).<sup>3</sup> Otto's work is still used as the basis of a good deal of the scholarship in comparative world religions to this day.<sup>4</sup> He said that the awareness of the sacred had to be added to the philosopher Kant's list of the fundamental categories of the human understanding, because it spoke of something real which human beings have been able to sense in the world around them at all times and in all cultures, and because it referred to a specific category of perceptions which could not be explained in terms of anything simpler. Otto said that this fundamental Kantian category (the numinous) could be schematized in three different ways: as the holy in the realm of spirituality and religion, as the sublime in the realm of aesthetics (matters concerning art and beauty), and as the transcendent good in the realm of ethics.

The important thing was that Otto demonstrated that this was what all religion was about, all over the world: teaching people how to encounter the sacred. Even religions which had no concept

of God, such as we see in some of the religions of Asia and in certain Native American religions, nevertheless had a well-developed concept of the holy or the sacred or the numinous.

The concept of the holy was an extremely important idea in eighteenth century evangelical thought. The English theologian John Wesley (one of the two founders of the modern evangelical movement) especially emphasized the need to learn how to become aware of the sacred dimension of reality in his sermons on spirituality. One of his most interesting comments in this area came in his discussion in one of his sermons of the Prayer Without Ceasing, which Christians are supposed to pray at all times (1 Thessalonians 5:17). The nature of this prayer had been much disputed within the Christian tradition. The Hesychast monks on Mount Athos in Greece, for example, had said that it was the Jesus Prayer (“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me a sinner”). That has continued to be one of the major traditions in the Eastern Orthodox Church. John Wesley however said that it was the Prayer of Moses in the book of Exodus (33:18), a simple prayer to God which said: “I beseech you, show me your glory.” Several verses earlier (in 33:11) it said in Exodus that “the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend.” Wesley said that developing this kind of God-consciousness was the goal of the spiritual life. We must learn to see God’s glory shining through in all things, and we must learn how to stand in the light of that glory and simply talk with God every day, in the way that we would talk with our best friend.

We often encounter people in the twelve step movement who have an impressive amount of serenity who say that they like to go out into the world of Nature and spend a quiet time as a kind of healing meditation. They say that they are using as their Higher Power what they feel when they are out in the woods and fields, surrounded by the trees and flowers and birds and animals.

John Wesley said that Nature was one of the important places where we could see the Glory and the Sacredness of the divine shining through with impressive clarity, and he also said that we should try to be aware of this at all times, because it would strengthen our spirits and comfort us and bring us peace.

The colonial New England preacher Jonathan Edwards (the other great co-founder of the modern evangelical movement) similarly pointed out that learning to see the Sacred in the world of Nature would produce a fundamental change in the way we reacted to the world around us. Edwards said that he had once been afraid of thunderstorms, but that after he came to a deepening of his faith, he began to understand that this was an expression of the majesty of the sacred. From the perspective of a new and deeper understanding of God, he came to regard the blazing bolts of lightning and the mighty rumbling of the thunder as a glorious tribute to the infinite power of God, and as a result, he came to delight in the same thunderstorms which he had once feared.

So using Nature as our higher power (in this kind of way) is a perfectly acceptable understanding of God, going back thousands of years in the Judeo-Christian tradition. This is simply listening to the Song of the Seraphim and taking it seriously.

### **Bill W.'s first conversion experience**

We can also sense the presence of the sacred in other kinds of contexts. Bill Wilson actually had two profound spiritual experiences at the end of 1934. One was the ecstatic vision of the great white light which Bill had in Towns Hospital in December, where he felt as though he was standing on a mighty mountain peak where the wind of the spirit blew.<sup>5</sup> But Bill said nothing at all about any kind of vision of light in the Big Book, although he did mention having an important spiritual revelation and feeling the wind of the spirit in the hospital while he was going through detoxification.<sup>6</sup> Instead he put the major emphasis in the Big Book

upon an experience which happened to him shortly before that, in October of 1934. Ebby Thacher had come to visit Bill in his apartment, and Bill had been going on at great length about how foolish any kind of belief in a good and loving God seemed to him. Finally Ebby said to him, “Why don’t you choose your own conception of God?” Bill says that his reaction to that apparently simple question was extraordinary: “At long last I saw, I felt, I believed. Scales ... fell from my eyes.”<sup>7</sup>

Most Americans used to read the Bible regularly in those days, or at least hear stories and sayings read from it in church and Sunday school, so most of the early readers of the Big Book would have immediately understood the reference Bill made to scales falling from his eyes. This was from the story of the apostle Paul’s conversion experience on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:18). The use of this phraseology — “the scales fell from my eyes” — indicates that Bill Wilson is telling us that this was his truly important conversion experience. This was unambiguous and unmistakable to biblically knowledgeable readers from Protestant backgrounds in 1939.

We need to look carefully at what was going on at the feeling level in what Bill W. regarded as the crucial part of this experience. He tells us that right after Ebby spoke those words, “the real significance of my experience in the Cathedral burst upon me.” Years before, when he was a young soldier in England, standing inside Winchester Cathedral and feeling overwhelming fear at being killed or maimed in battle after his unit was moved across the English Channel to fight the Germans in France, he had encountered God and felt “the sense of His presence.” His unbearable fear simply dropped away.

Years later, talking to Ebby in his apartment, he suddenly remembered that feeling in the church sanctuary and understood that it had been something real. And it had been he who walked away from God at that point, not vice versa.<sup>8</sup>



What he had felt in that Cathedral was the awareness of the holy. He also remembered feeling that sense of the holy or the sacred — although in a different kind of way — when he had sat as a child *outside* the church building and heard the voice of the preacher from a distance. The point Bill was making there was that it was not necessary to be inside a church building and be a church member in order to intuit the presence of the sacred dimension of reality. He spoke also about his grandfather, who had always insisted that this sense of the sacred which one could feel listening to the service in a little New England Congregationalist church was the same thing that he felt when he looked up at the stars at night, and became aware of the marvelous harmony of nature. And the advantage of doing it that way, outside the church, as his grandfather had pointed out to him, was that the preacher could not tell you how you were supposed to interpret what you were feeling!

This concept was so important to Bill W. that he introduced it into another story in the Big Book. He told about the alcoholic who was totally hostile to all spiritual concepts, and who was getting nowhere in the program until he was suddenly hit with a thought, “Who are you to say there is no God?” With this there came to him, Bill said, “a conviction of the Presence of God” which was an immediate and direct intuitive awareness of the sacred realm, similar to Bill’s experience in Winchester Cathedral. This story goes on to say that the man, using this human ability to sense the presence of the sacred and the holy, finally “stepped from bridge to shore,” and was able to set foot upon the land of faith.<sup>9</sup>

Bill W. also introduced this idea at an early point in the chapter to the agnostic.<sup>10</sup> Even the most skeptical atheists and agnostics who came into the early A.A. program had to admit that there had been moments when they were, for example, “enchanted by a starlit night.” And for a moment, “there was a feeling of awe and wonder,” even if “it was fleeting and soon lost.” That was the

primordial awareness of the sacred and the holy, upon which is built, in one way or another, all the religions of the world. That is because this kind of experience is one which is common to the entire human race, and has been sensed and felt in all the nations of the world at all points in human history. Everyone can learn to feel it and be aware of it.

So we need to be very much aware that in what Bill Wilson said was his real conversion experience, what finally brought him to faith was learning how to sense the feeling of the sacred and the holy and use it to strengthen and empower his soul. This was what was meant by “God-consciousness.” The angels had sung that the glory of the divine holiness filled all the earth, so practicing continual God-consciousness (as the early A.A. people stressed) was an attempt to be aware that *all* of reality was sacred. I am surrounded by the sacred right this moment, wherever I am, just as though I were standing in a church or temple. The ultimate sacred dimension of reality is right here with me, and all around me, and if I pay attention, I can feel this numinous presence in everything I can see and hear and touch.

It does not matter whether we call it “God” or the holy or the sacred or the numinous. All human languages have had a word for the holy: it was *qadosh* in ancient Hebrew, *hagios* in ancient Greek, *sacer* or *sanctus* in Latin, *tabu* in Polynesian, and *manitou* in the Algonquian language spoken by the Potawatomi tribe who live in my part of the United States, just to give a few examples. The name we put on it is not terribly important. Intellectual theories about it are not all that useful. What is vital however is that we learn how to actually feel it and experience it.

This was good eighteenth-century evangelical theology, going all the way back to its first beginnings in the 1730’s. This is what John Wesley called learning to pray the Prayer Without Ceasing, and what Jonathan Edwards called learning to feel “the excellency of the things of God,” which he described as the heart of the

conversion experience. Learning to sense the infinite power and majesty of the sacred — whether in the world of Nature, or in a church or mosque or temple, *or while attending a deeply spiritual A.A. or N.A. or Al-Anon group meeting* — is at the very core of traditional A.A., N.A., and Al-Anon spirituality.

## 2. The Spirit

What twelve step people call the spirit of the tables is what the Hebrew Bible calls the Spirit of God (God's power in action, breathing life into Adam, and calling up leaders like Deborah and Saul to save the people of Israel, and speaking through the prophets), and what the New Testament calls the Holy Spirit. In the ancient Catholic and Orthodox creeds, the section which speaks of the work of the Holy Spirit links it especially with "the communion of the saints," that is, with the divine spirit which binds the hearts of believers together and transforms them into a holy fellowship capable of transcending space and time and even death itself. The Father is God in his infinite transcendence and unknowability; the Holy Spirit is the same God, the one God, active here on earth in ways that we can immediately sense and feel within our hearts.

In more modern terminology, what we call the awareness of the Spirit arises from our human sense of inclusion in one important part (the healing part) of what the psychiatrist Carl Jung called the collective unconscious.

In the twelve step program, learning to feel the spirit of the tables means developing an awareness of the powerful spiritual reality which is present in a good twelve-step meeting, a kind of spiritual current running through all the people gathered together, connecting their hearts and spirits into a unity, and creating a spiritual force far greater by many magnitudes than the additive sum of the prayers of the individual people present could ever accomplish. The three greatest gifts of the spirit — faith, hope, and

love — are obtainable only when the spirit truly fills our hearts, for good Catholic theology and good evangelical theology both teach us that these are not natural human abilities but gifts of grace.<sup>11</sup>

John Wesley especially stressed this point and went on to say that whenever we saw people (of any religious background or no religion at all) who had learned to genuinely love others, and who had demonstrated that they could teach other people to love their fellow human beings, this was proof positive that the grace of God and the Holy Spirit had been at work. In this fallen world, there was no other way that they could have learned how to do that — this ability was totally lost to the human race as a natural power after Adam and Eve's fall from grace — so our job as servants of God was to honor these love-filled people, and not only that, but to rise up and defend them from any attack, as fellow servants of the true God. And Wesley insisted that this applied, whether they were Protestants or Catholics, Jews or Muslims, or even skeptics and freethinkers. We had to respect them and come to their aid if other people attacked them, or we ourselves were fighting against God and rejecting God's decision as to where he wished to send his grace.

Although the fourth chapter of 1 John did not show up explicitly on any of the early A.A. reading lists, it was nevertheless (just like the Sermon on the Mount, the letter of James, and 1 Corinthians 13) frequently quoted from by early A.A. spiritual teachers. 1 John 4 speaks very powerfully about the relationship between God, Love, and the Spirit:

Love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for *God is love* .... No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, *because he has given us of his Spirit*.<sup>12</sup>

Even newcomers who cannot sense the divine presence in any other kind of context can often feel the spirit of the tables. One of the great old timers in my part of the country, Ellen Lantz, said that “you can just feel love.” And so the twelve step people tell these beginners that if they wish to, they can take the spirit of the tables — the love which they can feel within the fellowship — for their higher power.

This was St. Augustine’s contribution to the development of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity: when we talk about real love and when we talk about the presence of the divine Spirit, we are talking about the same thing. The spirit, Augustine said, is the Love which binds the other two members of the Trinity together, the dynamic energy and will which empowers the Godhead.<sup>13</sup> It is the infinite divine well of energy from which all the other energy in the universe derives its being.

When the great Italian Renaissance poet Dante describes his vision of the eternal sunlight of the spirit in the concluding lines of his *Paradiso*, he follows this Augustinian concept of God, and says that the divine Love (which shines forth in that eternal light) energizes and gives guidance, not just to the souls of good men and women, but in fact to all the universe:

*Ma già volgeva il mio disio e'l velle,  
sì come rota ch'igualmente è mossa,  
l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle.*

But already it turned my desire and my freely given will,  
like a wheel evenly put in motion:  
the Love which moves the sun and other stars.

So even in the most impeccably orthodox traditional Christian theology, it does no harm at all for laypeople who are new to the faith to take as their God the holy spirit which is showering them with all-accepting love and creating the first new glimmers of real love within their own hearts. God is love, and the spirit of the

tables is God's love in action: *l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle*, "the Love which moves the sun and all the other stars."

### 3. The Good Itself and the Moral Law

What A.A. people call living in the sunlight of the spirit is exactly the same as the ancient concept of living in the sunlight of the Good Itself. This idea went back to the ancient Greek philosopher Plato who wrote at the beginning of the fourth century B.C. In his *Republic*, he told a tale called the Parable of the Cave.<sup>14</sup> Imagine, he said, a group of human beings who had been chained from birth in a dark cave, so that they could only look in one direction, towards one wall. Behind these prisoners was a large fire, and walking between the flames and the captives' backs were other people holding up various pieces of wood and other materials shaped like human beings and animals and ducks and trees and so on, so that the shadows of these objects were cast as black silhouettes against the wall the prisoners were compelled to gaze at.

Since all they had ever seen were the shadows of these objects (and their own shadows intermingled with them) the people in chains believed that this was the real world which they apprehended. If somehow two or three of these prisoners managed to free themselves from their chains and discover a way out of the cave, it would take time for their eyes to get used to the intensity of the light outside the cave, but they would gradually begin to realize that the real world was not the sad, two-dimensional world of black and white stereotypes which they used to live in, but this marvelous realm they now saw, made up of three-dimensional objects in brilliant colors and textures. Now they was no longer looking just at shadows of models of real things, but at the real things themselves.

In Plato's explanation of this extended metaphor, the world of the shadows is the place where most human beings live. It is a

realm of *doxa*, mere “opinion” — a Greek noun that comes from the verb *dokeô*, which means to suppose or imagine, to seem so, or merely appear so. And we also must not forget another Greek noun which came from the same verbal root, the word *dogma*, meaning an arbitrarily decreed doctrine set forth by some authority figure whom we were never allowed to question or challenge.<sup>15</sup>

The shadow world is therefore the mental realm of denial, illusion, and introjected parental admonitions (Freud’s superego) simply accepted as dogmatic truths about the world: “Good boys always do this, and good girls never do that.” “Are you going to let him get away with talking to you that way?” “You’re stupid and clumsy, you’ll never make good.” We perpetuate the shadow realm when, as a member of a dysfunctional family, we maintain the family lie by refusing to talk about or acknowledge in any way what really happens in our family.<sup>16</sup> We strut about pompously trying to make our shadows appear bigger than other people’s. We torture ourselves about shadows from the past, or throw ourselves into frenzied panic as our overactive imaginations project baleful shadows into the future. Some of the shadows are truly nightmarish boogiemens, with long teeth and claws and knives and instruments of torture. In the real world, we fail over and over again to accomplish what we set out to do, because no matter how carefully we analyze the shadows and no matter how hard we try to control these fleeting images, we end up grasping nothing, and we cannot discover why.

The shadowy realm of the cave is a world of black and white, like one of the old black-and-white American cowboy movies where the hero (who is absolutely pure and can do no wrong) always wears a white cowboy hat, while the villain (who is absolutely bad through and through) always wears a black cowboy hat. The leaders among the cave dwellers enjoy inventing hundreds of complicated so-called moral and religious rules, and telling the other people in chains that if they violate even a single one of these

rigid dogmas, that they will be automatically blackened by sin to the core and become completely evil. All the dogmas invented by these authoritarian leaders — all their legalistic “shoulds” and “oughts” — are regarded as *absolute* and their followers are ordered to follow them to the letter, blindly and mechanically, and without a single failure or omission, no matter how small.

Up above in the real world, on the other hand, we behold things by the light of the sun up in the sky. Plato said that the sun stood metaphorically for “the idea of the Good,” that which enables us to see what is right and beautiful, to recognize truth and intelligible meaning, and to act in a manner which is sane and sensible.<sup>17</sup> We observe the vision of the Good being apprehended in a very pure (although extremely primitive) fashion in very young infants, who see the world around them with awed and delighted fascination, and attempt to grasp it and taste it in eager curiosity and sheer joy.

The goal of good education is to inform this primitive vision of the Good while still retaining its openness and spirit of eager delight in the world. In some areas the infants’ parents do need to teach them that certain things are dangerous to explore (for example, no matter how fascinating the electrical plug is, trying to pull it out of the wall outlet may seriously injure or kill a crawling child). In other areas, children need to learn about levels of goodness that require more knowledge and intellectual structuring in order to be appreciated, which is one of the things that higher education accomplishes (in literature, art, music, science, and so on).

Plato pointed out that young people particularly find it especially difficult to rise above the gross physical level when it comes to appreciating goodness, and then only in rather spotty fashion in certain restricted areas of their lives. Johnnie wants to go out with Margie because Margie has beautiful hair and a good figure; Margie in turn wants to go out with Johnnie because he has a nice car, and clothes that match all the current teenage fads. This



is a crudely materialistic approach to life, which will never bring ultimate happiness, because it is blind to all the higher kinds of goodness. Even as adults, many people never rise much above the ability to appreciate the goodness of certain kinds of material things like automobiles, houses, clothes, and so on. So they are consciously aware of only tiny fragments of the goodness which surrounds them. At the very least, this gravely limits their lives and their enjoyment. Unfortunately, it is also usually apt to cause them to act in ways which are both self-destructive and destructive to others, because they fail to see the higher kinds of goodness in the world around them, and go around destroying good things without ever being consciously aware at the time of all the horrendous damage they are doing. At the end they are left crying out piteously, "Why is my life so terrible? I never did anything wrong."

But good education, along with experience, can teach us to expand our horizons and learn how to enjoy kinds of goodness that we were previously blind to. We can learn to appreciate good music and art and literature, and the fascination of ideas, and we can learn how to delight in the pure joy of learning itself. We can above all learn how to recognize what Plato called "justice," the difference between right and wrong at a higher level, which appears only when we look at issues in the Light of the Good.

The Platonic tradition particularly stressed one aspect of this metaphor of the sun and the cave. If we try to look directly at the sun, its light is so intense that it blinds us. The way we ordinarily determine whether we are outside in the sunshine (rather than being someplace in the dark) is not to look directly at the sun, but to look around and see if we can clearly distinguish other objects around us. If we look around and see green trees, and blue ripples on the surface of the nearby river, and red geraniums growing in a flowerbed nearby, then we know that we are in the sunlight. If we

see only darkness around us, then we know that we have lost the sunlight.

In medieval Jewish, Christian, and Islamic theology all three, it was believed that the Good of which Plato spoke was the supreme higher power whom the people of the book call God. His goodness is so bright that no human being can gaze on it without being blinded, so that it is impossible to paint a picture of what God looks like, or form any image in our minds of exactly what he is. But I know that God is present in my own personal mental world, first of all, whenever I can look around me and see a world filled with things that are so good and beautiful that I am overcome with gratitude.

Those on the other hand who have left the sunlight of the spirit, and instead gone as far as possible into the darkness, see a world around them that is full of evil, failure, futility, hate, resentment, pain, and confusion. They are no longer able to feel true good-hearted joy and delight at anything. The closest they can feel to this is an evil delight at defeating someone else, or doing someone else harm — a sick kind of pleasure (*Schadenfreude* in German) which will only lead us further and further into the realm of darkness.

Ancient and medieval Jewish, Christian, and Muslim philosophers were therefore in total agreement that the transcendent divine power which Plato called the Good Itself was the one whom they called God or Allah. Anyone who looked carefully could see that Plato, Moses, Jesus, and Mohammed were all talking about the same higher power. God IS the sunlight of the spirit and the Light of the Good, for this has been — for well over two thousand years now — one of the traditional orthodox Names of God.

In the eighteenth century, the founders of the modern evangelical movement simply continued this orthodox Christian tradition. John Wesley, for example, taught Greek and Roman

classics and early Christian theology at Oxford University, and was not only intimately familiar with all of these traditional orthodox ways of talking about God, but continually made reference to them in his works. Wesley's own stated definition of faith, based on Hebrews 11:1 and repeated over and over in his writings, was that faith was an intuitive awareness (partly analogous to but different from sense perception) of God himself in his light, glory, grace, forgiveness, and love.<sup>18</sup> One of Jonathan Edwards' most important works was a little piece called "A Divine and Supernatural Light," where he says that salvation comes from an intuition (an immediate moral/aesthetic awareness or "sense" rather than a rational demonstration) of the divine "excellency."<sup>19</sup> This is exactly what an ancient Platonist would have called the transcendental intuition of God as the Good and the Beautiful.<sup>20</sup> It was simply a rewriting, in eighteenth century language, of St. Augustine's medieval Catholic doctrine of illuminationism, the idea that we come to see the truths which save our souls only when God shines the sunlight of the spirit on us and in our lives and hearts. God's act of grace suddenly breaks through the darkness and spotlights a vital insight (about the nature of life and love and good and evil) which I needed to learn in order to be saved and grow spiritually.

"The divine and supernatural light" which saves us (in eighteenth century evangelical theology) is exactly the same thing as "the sunlight of the spirit" in the language of the modern twelve step program, that is, it is God himself shining his eternal light on us and showing us what is truly good. So people in A.A. and Al-Anon and the other twelve step fellowships who wish to take this as their way of thinking about their higher power are perfectly justified in doing so.

## **The Moral Law as the face of God unveiled**

One of the things which the divine light reveals is the universal moral law, which people in A.A., N.A., and the other twelve-step programs call the principle of Good Orderly Direction. John Wesley in the eighteenth century described that universal moral law as “the face of God unveiled.” It was at the very center of his evangelical theology, as we can see from his sermons on the law in his *Standard Sermons*. This law, he said, was the revelation to human beings of God’s heart. It was a picture of God, and it described who God really was: God was the one who created a universe in which human beings find their greatest fulfillment in acting morally and with love towards one another. In ancient Greek this universal principle was called the Nomos or Logos, that is, the divine Law or Meaning of life.

Wesley learned Spanish when he came to Savannah, Georgia, so he could discuss theology with the members of the Spanish Jewish community there, and was fully aware that what he was calling the moral law (the face of God unveiled, God as he may be known by human beings) was what the Jewish rabbis called the eternal Torah which the Holy One created before he began creating any of the rest of the universe, and used as a sort of architectural blueprint for its design. It was the Meaning and Purpose of the universe. This meant that when we were living in harmony with the eternal Torah or universal moral law, we were automatically living in harmony with the universe as God had created it to be, and also living in harmony with ourselves and the way that we would find our own greatest human fulfillment, because we were created by God too.

The Law of God (the true meaning of the universe) was therefore not an externally imposed rule which was laid upon us by an external authority figure, but the true principle of our ownmost being, that which lay within us at the core of our being and made

us authentically human. Each human being is a unique hypostasis or personification of the meaning of the universe, so each of us has his or her own natural focus in life, representing our own highly individualistic roles within that universal context of meaning. A young woman in A.A., Trina D., puts this very simply by saying “I am an extension of God’s intention.” Therefore, as St. Maximus the Confessor taught back in seventh-century Africa, the natural unfallen human will always automatically wills God’s will, because it is our own true will also.<sup>21</sup> (We are using the term “will” here in the sense of the Greek word *thelêma*, which means the human ability to want, wish, desire, intend, mean, decide, or choose one thing rather than another.)

Therefore all I really need to do to please God is just to be myself — but to be myself as I truly am, not the way my dysfunctional family or the corrupt civilization around me tells me to be. All I genuinely have to do to follow God’s will in my life is to find once again the true inner core of the human personality, the little Child of God within me who is made in the Image of God, and then simply do what comes naturally and follow my true inner self.<sup>22</sup>

Now as John Wesley in particular attempted to make especially clear, the universal moral law (Good Orderly Direction) is not itself God. It is part of the created realm. It is merely an image of God, not God as he is in himself. It exists only in the human mind, as an attempt by my mind to form an image of God. But we must remember that all good philosophical theologians in the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions have always agreed that the finite human mind cannot grasp or understand what God is in himself in any literal sense, because God in his essence is infinite and above all human concepts and attempts to rationalize the universe. Therefore we are forced to use symbols, images, and metaphors if we are to speak of God at all. What Wesley insisted however — and I believe that he is completely correct in this — is that the

universal moral law (Good Orderly Direction) is the most profound and the most helpful image of God which we possess.

If I were asked how I would try to describe some other human being (such as my wife or my father or a close friend) in the fullest and deepest kind of way, I would not waste any time on describing that individual's physical attributes, such as how tall the person is, or the color of the person's hair, or the shape of the person's nose or chin. I would attempt to describe that person's moral character, using phrases like "kind and decent and has a heart of gold," "dependable and trustworthy and someone you can count on when you're in a jam," "treats everybody with equal respect, from the highest to the lowest," and other statements like that. This gives us the true shape of that man's or woman's personality, who that person really is down at the core.

So when we say that "all" we can know about God is not a scientific explanation of how God creates things or where God is or what God looks like — that is, even if "all" we can learn to know about God is the universal moral law (the principles of Good Orderly Direction) — this means that what we do know about God, is *who God is* in the most important way of all, that is, who God is in terms of his personality and character. *God is he who asks us to treat other human beings with dependable, trustworthy, compassionate loving kindness.* And that is a truly extraordinary higher power, one to whom we can turn without fear, and call upon to heal our spirits and lead us into the realm of the Eternal Love and Light "which moves the sun and all the other stars."

Now someone might ask, when we speak of this sort of moral law as something which we should strive to follow, are we not falling into legalism and works righteousness once again? The answer to this is no, on two different grounds. God loves us just as we are, so we are not being told that we have to act this way in order to earn God's love. If we want to be happier, then the universal moral law describes the kind of life that we need to start

leading, but we will be doing that for ourselves — because we ourselves want our lives to be more enjoyable, and are tired of being angry and miserable — and not because we are afraid of God rejecting us. God will then help us lead that higher and finer kind of life, because he loves us and wants to see us happy, and delights in giving us gifts.

And furthermore, we are not being asked to follow hundreds of mechanical rules, but to study such things as the spirit of Paul's description of love in 1 Corinthians 13, as well as some of the stories which Jesus told, like the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37) and the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), and the story of the way God guided Abraham through the trackless desert and later sent Moses to lead the Israelites out of captivity in Egypt, to give a few examples from the Christian and Jewish traditions. We are then being asked to try to bring this general spirit of love, faithfulness, tolerance, forgiveness, and helpfulness into our own lives. This kind of love can and will break any legalistic rules which stand in the way of giving compassionate help to others.

This is what the letter of James calls the Law of Liberty (James 2:12). Following the Law of Liberty, the apostle James says, is the opposite of being *diakrinomenos*, which means being judgmental towards other people, where I show partiality towards some (the wealthy and successful and well-dressed and “proper” people, perhaps) on the basis of some kind of discriminatory and condemnatory set of principles, while criticizing everybody else and putting them down (James 2:2-4). Complicated legalistic law codes are always set up to mechanically condemn certain groups of people while paying no attention to them as individuals, and showing no feeling for their pain and suffering, and making no recognition of their limitations and what they really are (and are not) able to do at this point in their lives. The Law of Liberty however is the royal law — God's own law — which speaks only

of showing kindness, tolerance, forgiveness, and above all, mercy. “Judgment is without mercy towards the one who shows no mercy; mercy however turns judgment to ashes” (James 2:13).

When newcomers to the twelve step program take the idea of Good Orderly Direction as their higher power, and interpret this concept with tolerance, compassion, and mercy towards all, they are taking the highest and greatest image of God as the focus of their lives, which is not only good evangelical theology, but would have been recognized for the past two thousand years, by the best theologians and philosophers among the Jews, the Christians, and the Muslims all three, as an extremely good and effective starting point when beginning the spiritual life. Taking the idea of Good Orderly Direction as our higher power means truly turning our eyes towards God, even if at the beginning of our path we do not recognize him yet as God. That is perfectly all right. He recognizes us, which is all that is important, and delights in his heart at our salvation.

#### **4. The Truth Itself**

Now we come to one of the most important Names of God: God is the Truth Itself. St. Augustine in particular made this central to his understanding of God. In ancient Greek, the verbal root *lêthô* meant to escape, to go unseen or unnoticed. The noun *lêthê*, which came from this same root, meant forgetfulness or oblivion. The Greeks put the privative prefix *a* in front of this root, equivalent to putting “un” or “not” in front of a word, to produce their word for truth, which was *alêtheia*. So the Greek word for truth literally meant “no longer allowed to go unseen or forgotten.” It was an action word, which meant the uncovering of that which was hidden.<sup>23</sup>

Augustine said that it was this word which described God’s saving act, which snatched us back from the path to destruction. The truths that would save us were invariably buried under denial,



lies, and confusion. When the divine light shone, the coverings were stripped away, and the truth of our lives (and the fundamental truths of the universe) came into view in a moment of saving *insight*. This is referred to in books on the history of philosophy as Augustine's doctrine of illuminationism. As we have already seen, the co-founder of the modern evangelical movement, Jonathan Edwards, put this doctrine at the very center of his system also, as seen particularly in his little piece called "A Divine and Supernatural Light," where he said that the conversion experience itself, where we are changed by grace, is an act of illumination by God's eternal light, the sunlight of the spirit.<sup>24</sup>

Bill Swgan, the best spokesman from the early A.A. period for that branch of the movement which preferred to interpret the twelve steps in mostly psychological terms, said that "alcoholism is a disease of perception," a phrase which we still hear in A.A. today.<sup>25</sup> Alcoholics look at the world around them from a perspective which distorts everything they see and feel and hear. Alcoholics seethe with injured feelings as they say things to themselves such as: "This person deliberately did that to hurt me." "Because my spouse does not cater to my every demand instantly and unfailingly, and does not read my mind in advance as to what I will want, my spouse is a terrible person." "It was totally unfair for the boss to fire me simply because I was coming to work drunk all the time." They fall into unbelievable grandiosity when they say to themselves: "I am a great genius who is going to make a million dollars with this marvelous scheme I have." "The only reason I am not a world famous musician [novelist, race car driver, movie actress, or what have you] is because I have just had a little bit of bad luck." They can get in especially bad trouble when they begin telling themselves: "I can beat up anybody in this bar." Or they fall into total despair as they say to themselves: "I am no good. I am a failure. I will never achieve anything. I will fail at everything I try

to do. Life is not worth living any longer.” Fearful and resentful phrases like these all arise from a distorted perception of the world.

In order to perceive the world around us at all, the human mind has to construct a cognitive framework, which takes every piece of information coming in through the five senses, and assigns each piece of information to one or another of the pigeonholes created by that framework in the person’s mind. In other words, the new piece of information is given a label of one sort or another. This mental framework can make very prejudicial judgments, because all too often it tells us, prior to any investigation, that it is “obvious” that this kind of information is vitally important, but this other kind of information can be totally ignored. And it can do even more dangerous things. This cognitive framework also prestructures each piece of information *in advance* in terms of the way it will be fit in with the other things we know, or think we know. So the boss simply says, “you need to put those screws in a fraction of an inch deeper,” but if I have an alcoholic perception of the world, my mind may label this instantly under the category “deliberate insult,” in a cognitive framework where I believe that if I do not respond with instant anger and aggression at any “attempt to insult me,” I will be labeled a spineless wimp and stomped into the ground by all the people around me who sense my weakness and vulnerability.

Alcoholics look at the world around them through a cognitive framework which not only distorts everything that they hear and see, but also blocks out any possibility of hearing or seeing anything that might make them aware of how wrong their ideas about the world are. They live in continual denial because the cognitive framework of their minds will usually not allow any negative counter information to pass through to the judgment centers of their brains. On the rare occasion when a piece of information manages to get through which would raise questions about the truth of their preconceived ideas about the world, this

same cognitive framework supplies them with a readymade set of alibis and excuses for “explaining all that away.”

One of the reasons alcoholics have to “hit bottom” is because the weight of counter information must finally become great enough to force that distorted cognitive framework to totally collapse. The realities of the mess I have made out of my life have to finally become huge enough to cause all the alibis and excuses to collapse and fall apart. It is not just alcoholics, but the people in all of the other twelve step programs (including even the Al-Anons) who likewise have to do some version of hitting bottom, of getting to the point where their lives are falling apart, and they finally realize that they can go on no longer, because their old ways of thinking about the world do not work any longer.

But then we must receive a new vision of life, built on new principles of perception and behavior. We have to “reframe” our perceptions of the world, as the cognitive therapists put it. Otherwise we will simply commit suicide or go hopelessly insane at that point. And that is where the divine illumination comes in. The Light of God, as the Truth Itself, has to shine on our souls and show us how to form a different kind of cognitive framework to structure our thoughts and perceptions. As it says in the letter of James (1:5), “If any of you are lacking in wisdom, ask God who gives to all, without lying to you and without blaming you, and it will be given to you.” And how does God give us this gift of his grace? As it says in James 1:17-18,

Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of Lights, with whom there is no change [in his light] or turning away into shadow. In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the Word of Truth [*logô alêtheias*].

## Being Itself

There is another Name of God which at first glance appears to be yet a fifth and different name. St. Thomas Aquinas in the thirteenth century built his great theological system on the idea of God as Being Itself. But what Aquinas meant by the term “Being Itself” was almost identical to what St. Augustine called Truth Itself. Aquinas argued that his terminology was more accurate, but what was mostly going on here was that he was using the word truth in its Latin sense (*verum*), where truth was the adequation of the mind of the knower to the thing known, while Augustine was using the word truth in its Greek sense (*alêtheia*), where truth was the unveiling of that which had been hidden or forgotten or buried in pathological denial. If one used the word “truth” in the way that Aquinas did, one could argue that it was better to choose Being rather than Truth as the central theological focus, but this seems to me to have been more an argument over words than anything else.

In the early twentieth century, Thomas Aquinas’s theology was used as the basis of all Roman Catholic education, from parochial schools to universities. Two Roman Catholic scholars from that century give us particular help in understanding Aquinas’s concept of Being Itself. The works of the Thomistic scholar Etienne Gilson are especially useful in explaining the concept in its original medieval context, while the philosopher Bernard Lonergan, in his book *Insight*, does an especially good job of showing (in modern English and American philosophical terms) what the connection is between Being Itself and the act of insight in which the human mind discovers truth.<sup>26</sup>

Although we run into the idea of Being Itself in the modern period primarily in Roman Catholic theology, there have also been Protestant versions. The Lutheran theologian Paul Tillich, who was one of the greatest theologians of the twentieth century, took the Thomistic concept of God as Being Itself and put it into the context

of modern existentialist philosophy.<sup>27</sup> In his theology, the act of Being Itself is that act of new insight in which I learn to reframe the world around me in a new and different way, which will give new meaning to my life when everything I held dear seems to have been destroyed or to have ended in futility. This gives me a new mental framework for deciding what is true and what is false, and allows New Being to appear when my life seems to be plummeting into the abyss of Non-Being. It is of interest to note, from an A.A. perspective, that Tillich taught at Union Theological Seminary in New York City at the same time as Reinhold Niebuhr, the author of the Serenity Prayer.

### **Truth and Absolute Honesty**

Since understanding what is meant by the concept of Being is usually not part of the intellectual framework of people in the modern English-speaking world, it seems to me however that it is far more useful to go back to St. Augustine's original formulation, where God was linked to the unveiling of truths which had been hidden.

This is especially so because the spirituality of the Big Book owes more to the theology of St. Augustine than to almost any other source. In fact, for western theology of all sorts, both Roman Catholics and Protestants of all varieties (including the eighteenth century evangelicals and especially Lutherans like Frank Buchman, the founder of the Oxford Group), St. Augustine has been by far the most important source of spiritual concepts outside of the Bible itself. So we see the great Augustinian catch phrases and technical terms appearing over and over again in the A.A. Big Book.

Why do people find it so hard to admit the truth? Augustine pondered this at the end of his *Confessions*. If this is what would save our lives, why did people struggle so hard to resist knowing the truth? He came to the conclusion that it was because they were

so filled with pride that they could not stand to admit that they had been wrong, even literally to save their lives. So we human beings find ourselves in a position where foolish pride will put us in chains, while the truth will set us free.

Again and again we read in the Big Book that pride is at the root of most of the things we human beings do when we are engaged in the deeds which load our minds with unbearable fear and resentment. The *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* likewise says that there may be Seven Mortal Sins, but pride is by far the most important of them, and tends to become worked into the fabric of the other six vices in ways that make them far worse and even more difficult to remove.

Pride leads us to destruction, St. Augustine said, but the truth will save us and put us back on the path to healing and the saving of our souls. Therefore, as we read in the Big Book, before we can work the twelve step program effectively we have to give up our foolish pride and surrender to the truth. We have to begin by admitting that we had been wrong, in terms of the principles upon which we had tried to live our lives. We have to write out a Fourth Step, as a beginning exercise in confronting hard truth. A Fourth Step in which I gloss over some of the most embarrassing things in my life with various kinds of dishonest attempts at self-justification is totally useless.

(But we must give a warning here: it is also true that listing only the bad things in my self-inventory does not become the truth, the full truth, and nothing but the truth, until I also include an honest account of my genuine good points also. Partial truth is often not truth at all, but the most destructive of all lies.)

When we begin to understand that God is Truth Itself, it makes it so much clearer why the Big Book said that honesty was the gateway which led into the true spiritual path, and why it said that failure to be honest with ourselves would inevitably doom us. We

remember the ringing words from the beginning of the chapter on “How It Works”:

Rarely have we seen a person fail who has thoroughly followed our path. Those who do not recover are people who cannot or will not completely give themselves to this simple program, usually men and women who are constitutionally incapable of being honest with themselves .... They are naturally incapable of grasping and developing a manner of living which demands rigorous honesty.

Notice the unequivocal nature of that statement. This is a spiritual way of life “which demands rigorous honesty.” It breaks with the way the Big Book usually speaks, and does not “suggest” but *demand*s. It does not say that we can be halfway honest, but that we must practice *rigorous* honesty — strict, exact, uncompromising honesty. The truth shall set us free. God is the power of truth, while the Devil is the father of lies. Honesty is the gateway through which we must pass before we can begin walking the path that leads to salvation. The attempt to practice absolute honesty at all times is also what will keep us from wandering off that path further down the way.

### **A.A.’s great debt to the Oxford Group**

What did A.A. inherit from the Oxford Group? Many things, but let us especially note the importance of this principle of Honesty as the gateway to the path to glory. One of the best books about the Oxford Group is *I Was a Pagan*, written by a man named V. C. Kitchen, who joined the movement in New York City at the same time that Bill Wilson was becoming involved with the Oxford Group there.<sup>28</sup>

Kitchen says that he originally believed that the Oxford Group was nothing but a crazed cult. The place where he was forced to change his attitude, he said, was the point, during the first Oxford Group house party he attended, where he and another member sat

down in the hotel lobby to talk, and the other man told Kitchen honestly about himself. And Kitchen was ashamed, because he could not make himself speak the truth about himself that evening. But he came back for a second house party, and after it was over, he sat down on a sofa with his wife and began speaking the truth to her for the first time in their marriage. He talks about the incredible sense of release and freedom which this brought: it felt, he said, as though “some forty thousand pounds had rolled from our shoulders.”

The idea of making restitution or making amends was central to Oxford Group spirituality. If we look at the lives of both Frank Buchman (the founder of the Oxford Group) and Father Samuel Shoemaker (the head of its American branch) we see that the act of going to the people against whom they held such great resentments and apologizing and admitting their own wrongdoing, was the great spiritual breakthrough which brought them into the new way of life. A basic part of making amends in this way is simply *admitting the truth*, not only to God, but even more importantly to ourselves, and most importantly of all, to those whom we had so deeply resented. The truth we try to evade is that, regardless of what the other person did, we too were in the wrong before it was all over. But until we do that, we are not practicing complete honesty. We are not telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. We are telling ourselves the partial truth which can so often be the greatest of all dishonesties.

What did A.A. and the later twelve step movement inherit from the Oxford Group? Perhaps the most important thing of all was the recognition that trying to practice absolute honesty in all things was the only way that a real soul change could ever be produced. But this meant that those who were willing to surrender to the truth, and to get honest with themselves and with other people, would receive as their reward a kind of soul change which brought with it “a new freedom and a new happiness,”<sup>29</sup> the life of heaven



brought down to earth, surpassing anything they could ever have imagined experiencing in this world and this life. This most especially is what the Oxford Groupers gave to the twelve step movement, and for that all those whose lives have been saved by the steps must be eternally grateful.

## NOTES

1. *Alcoholics Anonymous*, referred to as “the Big Book,” 4th edit. (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 2001; 1st edit. pub. 1939), p. 58.

2. John 4:24 and 8:32.

3. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, 2nd ed. trans. John W. Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950). Rudolf Otto, *Das Heilige: Über das Irrationale in der Idee des göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen*, 11th ed. (Stuttgart: Friedrich Andreas Perthes, 1923). Otto took the term *Ahnung* from the German philosopher Jakob Friedrich Fries (1773-1843), who spoke of the *Ahnung* of the Infinite as the heart of spirituality, see Rudolf Otto, *The Philosophy of Religion Based on Kant and Fries*, trans. E. B. Dicker (London: Williams & Norgate, 1931). It was this study of Fries, as he notes at the end of that book, which prompted Otto to carry out his phenomenological study of the idea of the holy in religions all around the world.

4. See for example Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. W. R. Trask (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959).

5. *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1957), p. 63.

6. This was on page 14 of the Big Book, where he spoke of making a third step commitment after he had admitted himself into the hospital, and how, upon making that decision, “I felt lifted up, as though the great clean wind of a mountain top blew through and through.” In traditional evangelical theology, however, this was not a conversion experience *per se*, but the way in which God called him to preach, so to speak, because the outcome of this experience, Bill said, was the realization of the “thousands of hopeless alcoholics” to whom he needed to carry this message. In traditional evangelical theology, a conversion experience and a call to preach are both well-known but totally different kinds of spiritual experiences.

7. Big Book p. 12.
8. Big Book pp. 1, 10, and 12-13.
9. Big Book p. 56.
10. Big Book p. 46.
11. I Corinthians 12:31 and 13:13.
12. 1 John 4:7-13.

13. We also need to remember that in traditional Catholic and Orthodox theology, there are three hypostases in the Trinity but only a single operation (*energeia* or act). People who primarily focus upon the divine spirit (the third hypostasis) as their higher power are still effectively taking the entire Godhead as their higher power, because the entire Godhead always acts as one and as an inseparable unity.

14. Plato, *Republic*, 2 vols., trans. Paul Shorey, Loeb Classical Library (London: William Heinemann, 1935–7), 7.1.514A-3.518B. In 7.3.517B–C he said that the sun stood metaphorically for “the idea of the Good” (*hê tou agathou idea*), which was that which enabled us to see what is right (*orthos*) and beautiful (*kalos*), to recognize truth (*alêtheia*) and intelligible meaning (*nous*), and to act in a manner which was sane and sensible (*emphrôn*). This central concept therefore linked together the Good (and truth and beauty), and the establishment of the noetic realm (the realm in which the cognitive structures of our minds enable us to think intelligibly).

15. The Stoic philosopher Epictetus, for example, preferred to use the word *dogma* to refer to those basic principles of what we “should” do and “ought” to do, which we normally simply assume without question and then allow to dictate all our major decisions. So the entire Trojan war, Epictetus said, basically resulted from an unquestioned Greek dogma of that time about what you *ought* to do if your wife ran away with another man. See *Moral Discourses of Epictetus*, trans. E. Carter and T. W. Higginson, ed. T. Gould (New York: Washington Square Press, 1964).

16. See, for example, Eric Berne, *What Do You Say After You Say Hello? The Psychology of Human Destiny* (New York: Bantam Books, 1972); Susan Forward, *Toxic Parents: Overcoming Their Hurtful Legacy*

*and Reclaiming Your Life* (New York: Bantam Books, 1989). Also see Frederick S. Perls, *Gestalt Therapy Verbatim*, compiled and ed. by John O. Stevens (New York: Bantam Books, 1969), for example the stories he relates about Liz (pp. 87–95), and Maxine (pp. 142–152), and what Perls calls the “dybbuk” from the past who gets into someone’s mind and continues to dominate it with the poisonous emotions it inspires. In Jewish legend, a dybbuk is the ghost of a dead person which rises from the grave and totally takes over the mind of some living person, turning that man or woman into a mindless zombie who is rendered totally helpless and forced to speak the ghost’s words in the ghost’s voice, and perform the ghost’s actions.

17. Plato, *Republic* 7.3.517B–C.

18. See John Wesley, “An Earnest Appeal to men of Reason and Religion,” in Albert C. Outler (ed.), *John Wesley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), pp. 384–424. See also Glenn F. Chesnut, *Images of Christ: An Introduction to Christology* (San Francisco: Seabury/Harper & Row, 1984), ch. 4 “The Vision of God” (pp. 50–67) and p. 151.

19. Jonathan Edwards, “A Divine and Supernatural Light,” in Jonathan Edwards, *Basic Writings*, ed. Ola Elizabeth Winslow (New York: New American Library, 1966), pp. 123–134. See also Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* (Cleveland, Ohio: World Publishing Co., 1949), a superb intellectual biography of a man who was the greatest philosophical theologian whom North America has ever produced. And see also the reference to Chesnut, *Images of Christ*, in the preceding endnote.

20. For a study of this in the early Christian and medieval Eastern Orthodox tradition, see the beautiful and insightful book written by a Russian Orthodox priest named Vladimir Lossky, *The Vision of God*, trans. A. Moorhouse (London: Faith Press, 1963).

21. The best study in English of Maximus is the book by Lars Thunberg, *Microcosm and Mediator: The Theological Anthropology of Maximus the Confessor*, English revised by A. M. Allchin (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1965).

22. That is, as Maximus puts it, we must learn to will the natural will instead of the gnostic will. All human beings by nature spontaneously will the Good (as what they truly most want and desire), which is what God also wills. *Gnômê* is simply another Greek word which, like Plato's term *doxa* or Epictetus' term *dogma*, means mere opinion or a never questioned or investigated common societal assumption. When we will the gnostic will we are refusing to make an authentic decision (as the twentieth century existentialist philosophers put it) and refusing to take responsibility for ourselves. Instead we listen to the opinions of the other people around us, and blindly and uncritically accept whatever they say as true, and then act on it. The goal of the spiritual life, Maximus says, is *theôsis* (the divinization of our human lives), which we accomplish by reviving the image of God within our souls and making that the center of our lives, instead of blindly doing whatever the craziest and most destructive people around us are telling us to do. And I would like to add, as my own note, that some of the sickest and most dangerous people I have ever run into were wearing clerical collars or nun's habits or hitting on a Bible or Koran up in the pulpit, or claiming that they were the only ones who possessed "the true secret" of real old-time A.A. while continually attacking people viciously and spreading resentment and hate towards others wherever they went!

On the nature of will and the image of God in Maximus' theology, see Vladimir Lossky, *Orthodox Theology: An Introduction*. trans. I. and I. Kesarcodi-Watson (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1978), p. 106, and Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, ed. I. H. Erickson and T. E. Bird (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974).

23. The early twentieth-century existentialist philosopher Martin Heidegger pointed out the importance of understanding the deeper meaning of the Greek word for truth in his major opus, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: Harper, 1962). A human being at the foundational level is *Dasein*, "that which exists here and now," either seeking or fleeing from *alêtheia* (truth), which is the moment of insight in which new Being appears through the uncovering of the true ground of being. That ground is the soil in which all our ideas about Being and beings have their roots. The vision of the

ground itself is the primordial vision of that abyss of No-thing-ness which lies beneath all our human ideas and concepts in its total otherness and alienness, which can be felt and intuited as a liminal presence, but can never be analytically described by words and concepts drawn from other areas of human knowledge, or “explained away” in terms of things even more fundamental and basic.

24. In Jonathan Edwards, *Basic Writings*, ed. Ola Elizabeth Winslow (New York: New American Library, 1966), pp. 123-134.

25. William E. Swegan with Glenn F. Chesnut, Ph.D., *The Psychology of Alcoholism* (Bloomington, Indiana: iUniverse, 2011). Orig. pub. in 2003 as Sgt. Bill S. (with Glenn F. Chesnut, Ph.D.), *On the Military Firing Line in the Alcoholism Treatment Program: The Air Force Sergeant Who Beat Alcoholism and Taught Others to Do the Same*. Modern A.A. people may first have heard this phrase from Clancy, the famous A.A. speaker from California, who has a well known talk entitled “Alcoholism, a Disease of Perception,” but my own research seems to show that Sgt. Bill (who got sober in 1948 and had an extremely successful military alcoholism treatment program going by the early 1950’s) was using this phrase long before Clancy.

26. Etienne Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (New York: Random House, 1955). Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: a Study of Human Understanding* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1957).

27. Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952). Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, repr. 1967 as three vols. in one (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951-63).

28. V[ictor] C[onstant] Kitchen, *I Was a Pagan* (New York. Harper & Brothers, 1934). For more about that book, see Glenn F. Chesnut, *Changed by Grace: V. C. Kitchen, the Oxford Group, and A.A.* (Bloomington, Indiana: iUniverse, 2006).

29. Big Book, from the Twelve Promises on pp. 83-84.