

The Four Absolutes — Some History

I was asked to research the origin of the Four Absolutes and the pamphlet by that same name published by our office. We have scant local resources for research of this kind so I reached out to the Archives Department at our General Service Office. It was assigned to Associate Archivist Steven D'Avria who spent considerable time and careful effort on this task. Thank you so much, Steven! I blended his research with ours.

The Four Absolutes come from the Oxford Group, a precursor of AA. Both Bill W and Dr. Bob attended their meetings before starting AA and for a few years thereafter. We were originally the “drunk squads” of that organization. The book “What is the Oxford Group” presents these four moral principles in great detail but offers no advice from whence they came. The book “The Oxford Group: Its History and Significance” describes these as: “The ethical program of the [Oxford] Group is epitomized in the counsel of moral perfection defined by the Four Absolutes.” It further details much of the sources of the OG's tenets and suggested that the Four Absolutes themselves originated from the works of Presbyterian Minister Robert E. Speers.

When asked why the Absolutes were omitted from the Big Book, Bill W opined that their “moral perfection” was a too lofty goal for most alcoholics; “We claim spiritual progress rather than spiritual perfection.” Bill wanted to differentiate AA from the OG. “This was particularly true after 1936 when Dr. Buchman, founder of the OG, told the *New York World-Telegram* in 1936, three years before the start of World War II, ‘I thank Heaven for a man like Adolf Hitler, who built a front-line of defense against the anti-Christ of Communism’.” Buchman viewed Communists as a greater threat to world morality than Nazis. Many others disagreed! We needed to avoid this public controversy.

Nonetheless many AA members hereabouts found and find these principles of such universal usefulness that we publish a pamphlet on them starting in the 1940s. I and others, facing indecision, rely on these as a touchstone of God's will for me, the moral path to pursue. Dr. Bob spoke of this at length in his last major talk in 1948.