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CONFIDENTIALITY IN THE CHURCH OF
THE TWELVE STEPS

George J. Barry*

INTRODUCTION

Every state in the nation, as well as the U.S. territories of Guam, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, currently recognizes a need to protect the confidential communications between a person and his or her spiritual advisor.1 With no basis in state common

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1 State statutes designating specific religious leaders to whom the religious privilege applies seem unavailing in light of courts’ expanding view of the type of organizations that qualify as a religion or a religious organization. See, e.g., Warner v. Orange County Dep’t of Prob., 115 F.3d 1068, 1075 (2d Cir. 1996) (holding that Alcoholics Anonymous is a religious organization for the purpose of applying the Establishment Clause). The variations range from the vague, “[a] member of the clergy or other minister of any religion,” MINN. STAT. § 595.02 (2001), to the exclusive, “any Protestant minister of the Gospel, any priest of the Roman Catholic faith, any priest of the Greek Orthodox Catholic faith, any Jewish rabbi, or to any Christian or Jewish minister,” GA. CODE ANN. § 24-9-22 (2001), to the commendable, but laughable, “minister of the gospel, priest of the Catholic Church, rector of the Episcopal Church, ordained rabbi, or regular minister of religion of any religious organization or denomination usually referred to as a church,” TENN. CODE ANN. § 24-1-206 (2001).

The term “spiritual advisor” is commonly used in the privilege statutes to describe the job of the sacerdotal functionaries of the various religions. See N.Y. C.P.L.R. 4505 (McKinney 2001). For example, the New York statute states, “Unless the person confessing or confiding waives the privilege, a
law, this recognition has assumed statutory form, creating what

clergyman, or other minister of any religion or duly accredited Christian
Science practitioner, shall not be allowed to disclose a confession or
confidence made to him in his professional character as spiritual advisor.” Id.
(emphasis added). This note, therefore, adopts the term “spiritual advisor” to
be used interchangeably with “clergy” to represent the person performing a
particular spiritual service within the context of a religious organization that
recognizes that person as one capable of performing such services.

See, e.g., Keenan v. Gigante, 390 N.E.2d 1151, 1154 (N.Y. 1979)
(noting that the privilege did not exist at common law and holding that
communications between a prisoner and a priest are not protected by statutory
privilege when the testimony of the priest would not “jeopardize the
atmosphere of confidence and trust which allegedly enveloped the
relationship” between the priest and the communicant); Claudia G. Catalano,
Annotation, Subject Matter and Waiver of Privilege Covering Communications
to Clergy Member or Spiritual Adviser, 93 A.L.R.5th 327 (2001) (noting that
state courts have unanimously acknowledged that the religious privilege did
not exist at common law).

ALA. CODE § 12-21-166 (2001); ALASKA R. EVID. 506 (Michie 2001);
ARIZ. REV. STAT. § 12-2233 (2001); ARK. CODE ANN. § 16-41-101 (Michie
2001); CAL. EVID. CODE §§ 1033 (providing privilege to penitent) (Deering
2001), 1034 (providing privilege to clergy) (Deering 2001); COLO. REV.
STAT. § 13-90-107 (2001); CONN. GEN. STAT. § 52-146b (2001); DEL. R.
EVID. 505 (2001); FLA. STAT. ch. 90.505 (2001); GA. CODE ANN. § 24-9-22
(2001); GUAM CODE ANN. § 503 (2001); HAW. R. EVID. 506 (2001); IDAHO
CODE § 9-203 (Michie 2001); 735 ILL. COMP. STAT. 5/8-803 (2001); IND.
CODE ANN. § 34-46-3-1 (Michie 2001); IOWA CODE § 622.10 (2001); KAN.
STAT. ANN. § 60-429 (2001); KY. R. EVID. 505 (Michie 2001); LA. CODE
EVID ANN. art. 511 (West 2001); ME. R. EVID. 505 (West 2001); MD. CODE
ANN., CTS. & JUD. PROC. § 9-111 (2001); MASS. GEN. LAWS ANN. ch. 233,
§ 20A (West 2001); MICH. COMP. LAWS § 600.2156 (2001); MINN. STAT. §
595.02 (2001); MISS. CODE ANN. § 13-1-22 (2001); MO. REV. STAT. §
491.060 (2001); MONT. CODE ANN. § 26-1-804; NEB. REV. STAT. § 27-506
(2001); NEV. REV. STAT. ANN. § 49.255 (Michie 2001); N.H. REV. STAT.
ANN. § 516:35 (2001); N.J. STAT. ANN. § 2A:84A-23 (West 2001); N.M. R.
EVID. § 11-506 (Michie 2001); N.Y. C.P.L.R. 4505 (McKinney 2001); N.C.
GEN. STAT. § 8-53.2 (2001); N.D. R. EVID. 505 (2001); OHIO REV. CODE
ANN. § 2317.02 (Anderson 2001); OKLA. STAT. tit. 12 § 2505 (2001); OR.
REV. STAT. § 40.260 (2001); PA. CONS. STAT. § 5943 (2001); P.R. R. EVID.
28 (2001); R.I. GEN. LAWS § 9-17-23 (2001); S.C. CODE ANN. § 19-11-90
(Law. Co-op. 2001); S.D. CODIFIED LAWS § 19-13-17 (Michie 2001); TENN.
CODE ANN. § 24-1-206 (2001); TEX. EVID. CODE ANN. § 505 (2001); UTAH
CODE ANN. § 78-24-8 (2001); VT. R. EVID. 505 (2001); 4 V.I. CODE ANN. §
is commonly referred to as the “priest-penitent,” or simply “religious” privilege. The federal government also recognizes a religious privilege. Declining to codify the privilege explicitly, Congress instead adopted Federal Rule of Evidence 506, which failed to pass. Charles Alan Wright & Kenneth W. Graham, Jr., 26 Federal Practice and Procedure § 5611 (1992). The rule stated the following:

a) Definitions. As used in this rule:

(1) A “clergyman” is a minister, priest, rabbi, or other similar functionary of a religious organization, or an individual reasonably believed so to be by the person consulting him.

(2) A communication is “confidential” if made privately and not intended for further disclosure except to other persons present in furtherance of the purpose of the communication.

b) General rule of privilege. A person has a privilege to refuse to disclose and to prevent another from disclosing a confidential communication by the person to a clergyman in his professional character as spiritual adviser.

c) Who may claim the privilege. The privilege may be claimed by the person, by his guardian or conservator, or by his personal representative if he is deceased. The clergyman may claim the privilege on behalf of the person. His authority so to do is presumed in the absence of evidence to the contrary.
Rule of Evidence 501, which enables the federal judiciary to create evidentiary privileges “in the light of reason and experience.”

Although Rule 501 prompted expeditious development of a religious privilege, the federal judiciary had following the text of the rule to narrow the application of the privilege. Id.

The note reads in pertinent part:

[I]t is not so broad as to include all self-denominated “ministers.” A fair construction of the language requires that the person to whom the status is sought to be attached be regularly engaged in activities conforming at least in a general way with those of a Catholic priest, Jewish rabbi, or minister of an established Protestant denomination, though not necessarily on a full-time basis.

PROPOSED FEDERAL RULES OF EVIDENCE, supra, at 84-85; see also In re Grand Jury Investigation, 918 F.2d 374, 385 n.13 (adopting rejected Rule 506’s definition of clergy and limiting the privilege in a similar fashion). Ultimately, Congress rejected Rule 506, along with seven other specific evidentiary privileges, including the attorney-client privilege, psychotherapist-patient privilege, and “husband-wife” privilege, and three general rules proposed by the Court. See generally PROPOSED FEDERAL RULES OF EVIDENCE, supra.

8 FED. R. EVID. 501 (2002). Rule 501, enacted in 1974, states the following:

Except as otherwise required by the Constitution of the United States or provided by Act of Congress or in rules prescribed by the Supreme Court pursuant to statutory authority, the privilege of a witness, person, government, State, or political subdivision thereof shall be governed by the principles of the common law as they may be interpreted by the courts of the United States in the light of reason and experience. However, in civil actions and proceedings, with respect to an element of a claim or defense as to which State law supplies the rule of decision, the privilege of a witness, person, government, State, or political subdivision thereof shall be determined in accordance with State law.

Id.

9 United States v. Luther, 481 F.2d 429, 432 (9th Cir. 1973) (interpreting proposed Rule 506 to determine that a member of the clergy must be a natural person and not a corporation); In re Verplank, 329 F. Supp. 433, 436 (C.D. Cal. 1971) (determining that non-ordained counselors, recruited by a minister who was ordained by the United Presbyterian Church and was employed to counsel students about the Vietnam War draft, fell within the definition of clergy under proposed Rule 506).
already recognized the privilege, or a variation thereof, long before Congress had addressed the issue.10

Of the various evidentiary privileges in existence (e.g., attorney-client, doctor-patient, and psychotherapist-patient), the religious privilege has been the least controversial and most widely accepted.11 Nevertheless, the privilege has not been entirely free from controversy, and it has evolved through the relatively sparse caselaw on both the state and federal levels to protect communications meeting three general requirements:12 (1) the person communicating with her spiritual advisor must do so with a reasonable expectation of confidentiality;13 (2) the spiritual advisor must be, or reasonably be thought by the communicant to

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10 See Totten v. United States, 92 U.S. 105, 107 (1875) (stating that public policy would not permit at trial the disclosure of the “confidences of the confessional”); McMann v. Sec. & Exch. Comm’n, 87 F.2d 377, 378 (2d Cir. 1937) (recognizing “penitential” communications as privileged).

11 See, e.g., In re Grand Jury Investigation, 918 F.2d at 381 (“The history of the proposed Rules of Evidence reflects that the clergy-communicant rule was one of the least controversial of the enumerated privileges, merely defining a long-recognized principle of American law.”); JOHN HENRY WIGMORE, 5 A TREATISE ON THE ANGLO-AMERICAN SYSTEM OF EVIDENCE IN TRIALS AT COMMON LAW § 2396 (2d ed. 1923) (noting that Jeremy Bentham, “the greatest opponent of privileges,” supported the religious privilege).

12 Some opinions have recognized a fourth requirement, that the communication be penitential or confessional in nature, as may be required by the ecclesiastical doctrine of a particular religion. See, e.g., People v. Edwards, 248 Cal. Rptr. 53 (Cal. Ct. App. 1988) (holding that confidential communication between criminal defendant and Episcopalian priest was not privileged when not of a penitential nature); State v. Buss, 887 P.2d 920 (Wash. Ct. App. 1995) (“Washington’s statutory privilege only applies if Buss’ statements were a confession in the course of discipline enjoined by the church.” (internal citations and ellipsis omitted)). This requirement is largely rejected by more recent decisions; courts have expanded the privilege to apply broadly to communication reasonably expected to remain confidential. See, e.g., In re Grand Jury Investigation, 918 F.2d at 386 (noting that the religious privilege has evolved from protecting private confessions to encompassing a wide range of communications with clergy); State v. Martin, 975 P.2d 1020 (Wash. 1999) (abrogating Buss, 887 P.2d 920).

13 See In re Grand Jury Investigation, 918 F.2d at 386 (holding that the presence of a third party does not defeat the reasonable expectation of privacy when the third party is necessary for the furtherance of the communication).
be, \textsuperscript{14} a member of the clergy; \textsuperscript{15} and (3) the spiritual advisor must be acting in his or her professional capacity. \textsuperscript{16}

Courts have addressed, though not fully answered, questions regarding each of these requirements. \textsuperscript{17} The least litigated issue is what qualifications are necessary to be considered a spiritual advisor as required by state statutes and federal courts. \textsuperscript{18} In most cases, a person’s status as spiritual advisor is assumed. \textsuperscript{19} This assumption likely stems from a common understanding that most people claiming the privilege are attempting to protect information revealed to recognized leaders of widely accepted religions. \textsuperscript{20} Thus, courts need only address this issue when the

\textsuperscript{14} Most statutes granting the religious privilege protect communicants who may have been misled into believing the person with whom they were communicating was a spiritual advisor to whom the privilege applied. \textit{See}, \textit{e.g.}, \textsc{Idaho Code} § 9-203 (Michie 2001); \textsc{N.M. R. Evid.} § 11-506 (Michie 2001); \textsc{N.Y. C.P.L.R.} 4505 (McKinney 2001).

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{See In re Verplank}, 329 F. Supp. 433, 436 (C.D. Cal. 1971) (invoking the religious privilege to protect speech between college students and counselors providing spiritual counseling during the Vietnam War draft when the counselors had been appointed by an ordained minister of the United Presbyterian Church working as a college chaplain).

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{See United States v. Gordon}, 493 F. Supp. 822, 823 (N.D.N.Y. 1980) (holding communication with a priest acting in the capacity of a member of a corporation’s board of directors not privileged); \textit{State v. Barber}, 346 S.E.2d 441, 445 (N.C. 1986) (finding that a \textit{de facto} clergyman was not acting in professional capacity during a casual conversation with a friend).

\textsuperscript{17} \textit{See generally In re Grand Jury Investigation}, 918 F.2d 374 (determining whether communication with a clergy member was confidential when in the presence of a third party); \textit{see also Gordon}, 493 F. Supp. at 823 (holding that a priest was not acting in his “spiritual capacity” when discussing business matters with the defendant); \textit{In re Verplank}, 329 F. Supp. at 436 (noting that, while ordination might not be required for a person to qualify as a clergy member, “the person to whom the status is sought to be attached \textsuperscript{[must]} be regularly engaged in activities conforming at least in a general way with those of . . . an established Protestant denomination, though not necessarily on a full-time basis”) (citing proposed Rule 506 advisory committee’s note).

\textsuperscript{18} \textsc{Wright & Graham}, \textit{supra} note 7, § 5613.

\textsuperscript{19} \textit{Id.}

\textsuperscript{20} Despite the recognition and acceptance of numerous religions within the United States, the majority of statutes creating the religious privilege
status of the spiritual advisor is tenuous at best.  

In *Cox v. Miller*, the United States District Court for the Southern District of New York squarely addressed the issue of who qualifies as a spiritual advisor. The court found that New York’s religious privilege shields communications within the self-help setting of Alcoholics Anonymous ("A.A."), and its reasoning will likely protect communication within numerous organizations adopting A.A.’s hugely successful “Twelve Steps” to recovery. In its opinion, the court explicitly determined that A.A. members are spiritual advisors as that term is used and identify spiritual advisors as “clergy” or “clergymen” and limit their explicit definition of those terms to ministers, priests, and rabbis. See, e.g., *Ark. Code Ann. § 16-41-101* (Michie 2001). This note assumes the lists of statutorily denoted religious leaders are not exhaustive. The few cases discussing the issue support such an assumption. Compare *Reutkemeier v. Nolte*, 161 N.W. 290, 293 (Iowa 1917) (holding that elders of a Presbyterian church constituted clergy), *with Rutledge v. State*, 525 N.E.2d 326, 328 (Ind. 1988) (holding that a member of the Gideons, a religious organization of business people who hand out free Bibles, who was teaching prisoners about the Bible was not clergy). Furthermore, this note proposes to expose the privilege’s limitations when a person’s status as a spiritual advisor is suspect.

21 See, e.g., *Eckmann v. Bd. of Educ.*, 106 F.R.D. 70, 72-73 (E.D. Mo. 1985) (holding that a nun who was recognized by the Catholic Church as holding the position of “spiritual director” was clergy for privilege purposes); *Manous v. State*, 407 S.E.2d 779, 782 (Ga. Ct. App. 1991) (holding that a psychic was not a clergy member regardless of any self-characterization as a spiritual advisor); *State v. Alsipach*, 524 N.W.2d 665, 668 (Iowa 1994) (holding that the defendant failed to prove his brother was a member of the clergy despite his view that his brother was a spiritual advisor); *Rutledge*, 525 N.E.2d at 328 (holding that a member of the Gideons was not clergy).


25 According to the most recent information released by A.A., as of Jan. 1, 2002, its membership comprised 100,766 groups containing a total of more than 2,000,000 individuals, with approximately 1,162,112 members in the United States. Alcoholics Anonymous, Membership, at http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org/english/E_FactFile/M-24_d4.html (last visited Apr. 2, 2002). A.A. acknowledges that the strictures of anonymity and the general lack of formal organization complicate attempts to maintain accurate statistical records. Id.
defined in the statute. In so doing, the court extended both the New York statutory privilege and the federal common law privilege beyond what “the light of reason and experience” could ever possibly have revealed.

Part I of this note includes a discussion of the formation of A.A. and the judicial recognition of A.A. as a religious organization. In addition, Part I briefly introduces the Cox decision. Part II explores the Cox reasoning in depth, revealing the factual and legal flaws pervading the court’s decision. These flaws help bring to light two primary reasons why the religious privilege, absent legislative approval, has no place in the A.A. setting: (1) despite its designation as a religious organization, A.A. does not fit within the framework of the religious privilege; and (2) public policy cannot endorse a judiciary willing to put the addiction recovery interests of a criminal confessor above those of his or her fellow recovering confidant. Part III addresses the concerns of the critics who support expanding the religious privilege to encompass A.A. and demonstrates that their arguments are replete with speculation and unsupported by

28 Currently, the Second and Seventh Circuits are the only federal circuits to have recognized A.A. or groups adopting A.A.’s principles as religious organizations for the purpose of determining whether the Establishment Clause permits the government to compel attendance at those organizations’ meetings. See Warner v. Orange County Dep’t of Prob., 115 F.3d 1068 (2d Cir. 1996) (discussed infra Part I.B); Kerr v. Farrey, 95 F.3d 472, 480 (7th Cir. 1996) (holding that Narcotics Anonymous is a religious organization). The issue, therefore, is far from settled and beyond the scope of this note. Nevertheless, the author accepts the Second and Seventh Circuits’ conclusion, which has been welcomed by some commentators. See, e.g., Derek P. Apanovitch, Note, Religion and Rehabilitation: The Requisition of God by the State, 47 DUKE L.J. 785 (1998) (discussing the various religious aspects of A.A.); Rachel F. Calabro, Note, Correction Through Coercion: Do State Mandated Alcohol and Drug Treatment Programs in Prisons Violate the Establishment Clause?, 47 DEPAUL L. REV. 565 (1998) (arguing that A.A.’s adoption of traditional religious concepts qualifies the organization for Establishment Clause protection).
29 Cox v. Miller, 154 F. Supp. 2d 787 (S.D.N.Y. 2001)
SILENCE VERSUS SOBRIETY

science. This note concludes that protecting communication within A.A. by expanding religious privileges, an extreme solution for a virtually non-existent problem, is unnecessary in light of the protection provided by the Free Exercise Clause of the United States Constitution.

I. ESTABLISHING THE CHURCH OF THE RECOVERING ALCOHOLIC

A.A. takes no official position on public issues. Despite being the subject of several court opinions, A.A. has adhered to this principle and has refrained from issuing an official statement challenging or praising the judicial portrayals or the consequences arising therefrom. In order to understand A.A., it is, therefore, necessary to explore the history and principles guiding the development and survival of what is arguably the world’s largest self-help organization. Following a discussion of

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30 See generally Thomas J. Reed, The Futile Fifth Step: Compulsory Disclosure of Confidential Communications Among Alcoholics Anonymous Members, 70 ST. JOHN’S L. REV. 693 (discussing various rationales, including the expansion of the religious privilege, for protecting confidential speech within A.A.); Jessica G. Weiner, Comment, “And the Wisdom to Know the Difference”: Confidentiality vs. Privilege in the Self-Help Setting, 144 U. PA. L. REV. 243 (1995) (arguing in favor of an evidentiary privilege to protect speech within A.A.); see also infra Part III (discussing critics’ views).

31 U.S. CONST. amend. I.

32 See ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS WORLD SERVICES, INC., TWELVE STEPS AND TWELVE TRADITIONS 176 (soft-cover edition 1981) [hereinafter TWELVE STEPS AND TWELVE TRADITIONS] (stating, as A.A.’s tenth tradition, “Alcoholics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the A.A. name ought never be drawn into public controversy”).

33 Id. (“As by some deep instinct, we A.A.’s have known from the very beginning that we must never, no matter what the provocation, publicly take sides in any fight, even a worthy one.”); see also Jim Fitzgerald, Judge Voids Manslaughter Conviction, AP ONLINE, Aug. 2, 2001, available at 2001 WL 25489398 (stating that an A.A. spokesman said that A.A. would not comment on the Cox decision); Frank J. Murray, Courts Hit Sentencing DWIs to A.A., Fault Religious Basis, WASH. TIMES, Nov. 4, 1996, at A10, available at 1996 WL 2970041 (stating that A.A. would not comment on various courts’ opinions finding that the organization was religion-based).

34 See supra note 25 (noting A.A.’s size in terms of members).
A.A.’s history is a description of the Second Circuit opinion that designated A.A. a religious organization and an introduction to the case that inspired this note.

A. Alcoholics Anonymous: Laying the Groundwork

Although its history extends back before its official creation,35 A.A.’s present-day roots began to form when Bill Wilson met Dr. Bob Smith; both were professionals desperately seeking refuge from alcoholism.36 Together, applying principles adopted from other recovery groups, they began to create what would become A.A.’s doctrinal foundation.37 Dr. Smith and Mr. Wilson oversaw the establishment of three A.A. groups, one located in Akron, another in Cleveland, and the third in New York City.38 Central to the groups’ existence was the belief that the members needed to (1) acknowledge a lack of control over their lives and their alcohol problem, (2) recognize that they were at the lowest point in their lives, (3) turn their lives over to a “higher power,”39 and (4) believe that these steps would eventually lead to a life of sobriety.40 These four core beliefs evolved into the now-popular “Twelve Steps,”41 first published in the 1939 book

35 See Reed, supra note 30, at 708-14 (discussing, inter alia, the history of A.A.).

36 See ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS WORLD SERVICES, INC., ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS, xv-xvii (3d ed. 2001) [hereinafter ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS].

37 Id.

38 Id.

39 Id. at 25.

40 See Reed, supra note 30, at 708-14 (discussing, inter alia, the history of A.A.).

41 TWELVE STEPS AND TWELVE TRADITIONS, supra note 32, at 5-9.

A.A.’s Twelve Steps are as follows:

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.

2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood him.
“Alcoholics Anonymous,”\textsuperscript{42} which were meant as suggestions for alcoholics trying to recover.\textsuperscript{43} In 1950, A.A.’s organizers adopted the “Twelve Traditions”\textsuperscript{44} as principles guiding the

4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

\textit{Id.}\textsuperscript{42} \textit{ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS, supra} note 36.
\textsuperscript{43} \textit{Id.} at 59.
\textsuperscript{44} \textit{See TWELVE STEPS AND TWELVE TRADITIONS, supra} note 32, at 9-13.

A.A.’s Twelve Traditions are as follows:
1. Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon A.A. unity.
2. For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority—a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern.
3. The only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking.
4. Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole.
5. Each group has but one primary purpose—to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.
The organization itself.\textsuperscript{45} While the founders intended the Twelve Steps to guide an individual member to recovery, the Twelve Traditions served to guide an individual in contributing to A.A.’s overall success and survival.\textsuperscript{46} They were not, however, established or subsequently interpreted as a strict set of rules.\textsuperscript{47} Rather, like the Twelve Steps, the Twelve Traditions were unenforceable guidelines for the individual members whose own interests A.A. was meant to serve.\textsuperscript{48}

We believe there isn’t a fellowship on earth which lavishes more devoted care upon its individual members; surely there is none which more jealously guards the individual’s right to think, talk, and act as he wishes. No A.A. can compel another to do anything; nobody can be punished or expelled. Our Twelve Steps to recovery are

6. An A.A. group ought never endorse, finance, or lend the A.A. name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property, and prestige divert us from our primary purpose.
7. Every A.A. group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions.
8. Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever nonprofessional, but our service centers may employ special workers.
9. A.A., as such, ought never be organized; but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve.
10. Alcoholics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the A.A. name ought never be drawn into public controversy.
11. Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio and films.
12. Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.

\textit{Id.}\textsuperscript{45} \textit{Id.} at 18.
\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Id.} at 129; see also \textit{Alcoholics Anonymous}, supra note 36, at xix (describing the rationale that led to the adoption of the Twelve Traditions as the need to develop “principles by which the A.A. groups and A.A. as a whole could survive and function effectively”).
\textsuperscript{47} \textit{Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions}, supra note 32, at 129.
\textsuperscript{48} \textit{Id.}
suggestions; the Twelve Traditions which guarantee A.A.’s unity contain not a single “Don’t.” They repeatedly say “We ought . . .” but never “You Must!”

B. Problematic Reasoning Spawns a Religion

A.A. views itself as a secular organization. It is not affiliated with, nor does it endorse, any religion or religious group. Indeed, theists and atheists can apply A.A.’s principles. Regardless, the judicial community has begun viewing A.A. as a religious organization.

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49 Id.

50 See, e.g., ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS, supra note 36, at xx (“Alcoholics Anonymous is not a religious organization.”); 44 Questions, pamphlet P-2, at 19 (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., 1952) (“A.A. is not a religious society.”); This is AA, pamphlet P-1, at 7 (Alcoholics Anonymous World Service, Inc., 1984) (“We are not reformers, and we are not allied with any group, cause, or religious denomination.”).

51 See supra note 44 (stating A.A.’s sixth tradition).

52 See TWELVE STEPS AND TWELVE TRADITIONS, supra note 32, at 27 (“You can, if you wish, make A.A. itself your higher power.”).

53 See, e.g., Griffin v. Coughlin, 673 N.E.2d 98, 101-05 (N.Y. 1996) (holding that a prison requiring inmates to attend a rehabilitation program that incorporated A.A. and N.A. in order to receive various benefits constituted an excessive entanglement in religion); In re Garcia, 24 P.3d 1091, 1094 (Wash. Ct. App. 2001) (holding that A.A.’s religious content precludes the government from coercing an inmate to attend A.A. meetings). It is not clear whether courts adopting this view have technically designated A.A. as a religion, as opposed to simply a secular organization incorporating spiritual ideals into its suggestions for achieving sobriety. For example, in Warner v. Orange County Dep’t of Prob, the Second Circuit refers to A.A.’s “substantial religious component,” 115 F.3d 1068, 1070 (2d Cir. 1996), “religion-infused meetings,” id. at 1074, and “religious exercises,” id. at 1075. The court also referred to A.A. as a “religious program,” id., and describes A.A. meetings as “intensely religious events.” Id. Additionally, the Warner court distinguished between A.A. meetings and a public school offering a commencement prayer. Id. at 1076. A subsequent Second Circuit case interpreted Warner as having characterized A.A. as a religion. See DeStefano v. Emergency Hous. Group, 247 F.3d 397, 407 (2d Cir. 2001) (upholding the district court’s finding, which was based on Warner, that A.A. is “a religion for Establishment Clause purposes”) (internal quotations omitted). The Cox
Most cases holding that A.A. is a religious organization involve a prisoner or probationer bringing suit on the grounds that the government required him or her to attend A.A. meetings or meetings of other recovery programs adopting Cox v. Miller, 154 F. Supp. 2d, 787, 792 (S.D.N.Y. 2001) ("Our Court of Appeals has subsequently held in the context of an Establishment Clause case that A.A. is a religion . . . ."). This note accepts, for now, the Cox court’s interpretation, but utilizes the term “religious organization” when referring to A.A.

Presently, not all courts addressing the issue agree that A.A. is a religious organization. See, e.g., Boyd v. Coughlin, 914 F. Supp. 828, 833 (N.D.N.Y. 1996) ("The mere reference to spirituality, or the use of terms that may be commonly associated with religion, without more, cannot change the character of A.A. or N.A. . . . from that of aiming to treat chemically dependent individuals to that of advancing or inhibiting religion as a principal or primary purpose."); Jones v. Smid, No. 4-89-CV-20857, 1993 WL 719562, at *4 (S.D. Iowa, Apr. 29, 1993) (holding that A.A.’s religious content does not transform it into a religious organization); Salaam v. Collins, 830 F. Supp. 853, 863 (D. Md. 1993) (classifying A.A. as a “secular self-help . . . organization["]’); Stafford v. Harrison, 766 F. Supp. 1014, 1016-17 (D. Kan. 1991) (holding that A.A.’s spiritual content and reference to a “Higher Power” are not sufficient to deem A.A. a religion; therefore, requiring an inmate to attend meetings of program based on A.A. did not violate the Establishment Clause); Youle v. Edgar, 526 N.E.2d 894, 899 (Ill. App. Ct. 1988) (dismissing an argument that A.A. is a “quasi-religious organization,” noting that “[t]he primary function of Alcoholics Anonymous is to cope with the disease of alcoholism”); State v. Boobar, 637 A.2d 1162, 1169-70 (Me. 1994) (holding that the religious privilege is inapplicable to A.A. communication).

In addition, some opinions raise the issue but fail to reach a definitive decision. See O’Connor v. State, 855 F. Supp. 303, 307-08 (C.D. Cal. 1994) (noting A.A.’s “religious overtones” but never making clear whether the court viewed A.A. as a religious organization for Establishment Clause purposes, emphasizing that the “principal and primary effect’ of encouraging participation in A.A. is not to advance religious belief but to treat substance abuse”) (quoting Lemon v. Kurtzman, 403 U.S. 602, 612 (1971)).

DeStefano represents the exception. 247 F.3d 397. This case was brought in the Second Circuit after Warner, which initially deemed A.A. a religious organization. See Warner, 115 F.3d 1068. The plaintiff in DeStefano, then mayor of Middletown, N.Y., sued as a taxpayer on the grounds that the state was funding a private alcoholic treatment facility that incorporated A.A. meetings into its program. DeStefano, 247 F.3d at 401.
principles similar or identical to the Twelve Steps. For example, in *Warner v. Orange County Department of Probation*, the Second Circuit held that a probationer could not be compelled to attend A.A. meetings against his will when he had no foreknowledge of A.A.’s “intensely religious events” and he had not waived his objection to attending the meetings. As support for its unilateral transformation of A.A. into a religious organization, the Second Circuit cited the various

The court upheld *Warner* but found that the state funding of a large, purely secular alcohol treatment program that merely incorporated A.A. as a part of the program did not, by itself, violate the Establishment Clause of the U.S. Constitution. *Id.* at 408-09.


*Id.* at 1075.

*Id.* at 1074.

The term “unilaterally” serves a dual purpose. First, although the Second Circuit was not the first to hold that a twelve step program constituted a religious organization for Establishment Clause purposes, it was the highest federal court to apply that distinction specifically to A.A. The Seventh Circuit, in *Kerr v. Farrey*, had already determined that Narcotics Anonymous was a religious organization. 95 F.3d at 480. *Kerr* addressed an inmate’s claim that the state had violated his constitutional rights by coercing him to attend N.A. meetings. *Id.* at 473. The court found that the meetings centered on N.A.’s own version of the Twelve Steps, which, nearly identical to A.A.’s, included references to God. *Id.* at 474. The court stated that regardless of one’s interpretation of God, N.A. had incorporated into its program a “religious concept of a higher power.” *Id.* at 480. The state, therefore, could not coerce prisoners to attend N.A. meetings. *Id.* Second, the term “unilaterally” is used here to draw attention to the fact that the Second Circuit, while appearing to
references within the Twelve Steps to “God” or a “Higher Power,”60 as well as the Southern District of New York’s factual findings that the A.A. meetings at issue incorporated “Christian”61 prayers.62 The court did not indicate which factor was decisive—the references to God or the use of prayer. Consequently, it is not clear whether the court viewed the language of the Twelve Steps alone as sufficient for A.A. to qualify as a religious organization, or whether something more, such as the incorporation of prayer, is necessary.

Although the Second Circuit has not clarified the issue, were it to do so it would likely find that the Twelve Steps language alone is insufficient to deem A.A. a religious entity. The Warner court quoted passages from the Twelve Steps,63 but it is not clear that the court did anything more than selectively choose only

act on A.A.’s behalf by affording a special degree of constitutional protection, operated without any input by A.A, which has always adhered to the view that it is a secular organization. See supra note 50 (referring to the various statements A.A. has made regarding its secular nature).

60 Warner, 115 F.3d at 1070. The court noted that A.A.’s second, third, fifth, sixth, seventh, and eleventh steps contain either or both references. Id.; see also supra note 41 (listing the Twelve Steps).

61 Warner, 115 F.3d at 1070; see also Warner v. Orange County Dep’t of Prob., 870 F. Supp. 69, 71 (S.D.N.Y. 1994) (describing the “Lord’s Prayer” as being “specifically Christian”). The meetings Warner attended began with the “Serenity Prayer,” which the district court determined was “non-denominational.” Id. It states, “Lord, grant me the serenity to accept the things that I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” Id. Additionally, the district court found that the meetings ended with the “Lord’s Prayer.” Id. The King James version of the Bible translates the Lord’s Prayer:

Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.


62 Warner, 115 F.3d at 1070.

63 Id.
those passages supporting its view that A.A. is a religious organization. If this is true, the case sets an unnerving precedent. While judicial interpretation of an organization’s doctrine might be necessary to draw legal conclusions, the judiciary should in so doing ensure that the process is a diligent effort to uncover the truth. Applying standards similar to canons of statutory interpretation, a court should necessarily extend its investigation beyond the ambiguous verbiage of the Twelve Steps in order to give effect to A.A.’s intent. Consequently, the court would find that A.A. considers it appropriate to look to the organization itself as one’s “Higher Power.” Thus, within the A.A. framework, the terms “Higher Power” and “God” assume entirely generic characteristics. Mere reference to a Higher

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64 Id.
65 See Nix v. Whiteside, 475 U.S. 157, 174 (1986) (describing the U.S. “system of justice” as “dedicated to a search for truth”); see also United States v. Roberson, 859 F.2d 1376, 1378 (9th Cir. 1988) (stating that federal courts “construe evidentiary privileges narrowly” because they “obstruct the search for truth”); In re Cueto, 554 F.2d 14, 15 (2d Cir. 1977) (“[T]he public has a right to every person’s evidence. There are a small number of constitutional, common-law and statutory exceptions to that general rule, but they have been neither ‘lightly created nor expansively construed, for they are in derogation of the search for truth.’”) (quoting United States v. Nixon, 418 U.S. 683, 710 (1974)).
66 See, e.g., New Lamp Chimney Co. v. Ansonia Brass & Copper Co., 91 U.S. 656, 662 (1875) (“Statutes must be interpreted according to the intent and meaning of the legislature.”).
67 TWELVE STEPS AND TWELVE TRADITIONS, supra note 32, at 27.
68 See AMERICAN HERITAGE DICTIONARY 756 (3d ed. 1996) (defining “generic” as “relating to or descriptive of an entire group or class; general”). In this context, since one following the Twelve Steps can view either one’s interpretation of God or the A.A. group itself as one’s higher power, then in the A.A. framework, the A.A. group would be analogous to God. In religious terms, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to draw an acceptable comparison between the A.A. group and a divine entity. Since both can be considered as one’s higher power, however, it would seem that to the recovering alcoholic following A.A.’s guidelines, either God or the A.A. group would serve generally as a source, beyond the individual, to which one looks for strength and guidance. See Richard D. Land & Michael K. Whitehead, Do Students Have a Prayer After Lee v. Weisman, 6 U. FLA. J.L.
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Power or God within the Twelve Steps, without more, is hardly sufficient to label A.A. a religious organization, lest the Twelve Steps become to the twenty-first century what the “neck verse” was to the seventeenth.69


69 The term “neck verse” refers to the test once utilized in England to determine whether a criminally accused person was a member of the clergy and, thus, deserving of the “benefit of clergy,” which precluded administration of the death penalty. HAROLD POTTER, POTTER’S HISTORICAL INTRODUCTION TO ENGLISH LAW AND ITS INSTITUTIONS 362-63 (A.K.R. Kiralfy ed., 1958). Until the early eighteenth century, benefit of clergy was conferred upon only those who could read, the presumption being that clergy were the only literate members of society. See Sir Frank Kermode, Justice and Mercy in Shakespeare, 33 HOUS. L. REV. 1155, 1163 (1996). To establish literacy, the court required an accused to read or recite a particular biblical verse. POTTER, supra, at 362. As the literacy rate increased, however, and knowledge of the verse became widespread, the neck verse became unreliable, eventually serving to aid even those who were prohibited by law from becoming ordained. Id.

Had the Warner court determined that the mere presence of words evoking the concept of “God” within the credo or doctrine of an organization was, by itself, enough to label that organization religious, the Establishment Clause would take on new meaning. See, e.g., Lynch v. Donnelly, 465 U.S. 668, 692-93 (1984) (O’Connor, J., concurring) (referring to the United States’ adoption of “In God We Trust’ on coins, and opening court sessions with ‘God save the United States and this honorable court’” as “government acknowledgements of religion,” as opposed to endorsement of religion). In Lynch, the Court held that a city’s inclusion of a Nativity scene within its Christmas display did not constitute government endorsement or advancement of religion and, thus, violate the Establishment Clause when the purpose and the overall effect of the display were secular. Id. at 681-83. The Court noted that the display, aside from the Nativity scene, also included “a Santa Claus house, reindeer pulling Santa’s sleigh, candy-striped poles, a Christmas tree, carolers, cutout figures representing such characters as a clown, an elephant, and a teddy bear, hundreds of colored lights, [and] a large banner that reads ‘Seasons Greetings’. . . .” Id. at 671. The court went on to say the following:

It would be ironic, however, if the inclusion of a single symbol of a particular historic religious event, as part of a celebration acknowledged in the Western World for 20 centuries, and in this
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As the Second Circuit stated in *Warner*, however, something more was present at the meetings the plaintiff attended—Christian prayers.70 This appears to have tipped the scales in favor of recognizing A.A. as a religious organization.71 But, the *Warner*
country by the people, by the Executive Branch, by the Congress, and the courts for two centuries, would so “taint” the City’s exhibit as to render it violative of the Establishment Clause. To forbid the use of this one passive symbol—the crèche—at the very time people are taking note of the season with Christmas hymns and carols in public schools and other public places, and while the Congress and Legislatures open sessions with prayers by paid chaplains would be a stilted over-reaction contrary to our history and to our holdings. If the presence of the crèche in this display violates the Establishment Clause, a host of other forms of taking official note of Christmas, and of our religious heritage, are equally offensive to the Constitution. 

*Id.* at 686. Later holding that a county and city’s display depicting the Nativity violated the Establishment Clause, the Court, in *County of Allegheny v. American Civil Liberties Union Greater Pittsburgh Chapter*, interpreted *Lynch* to require an evaluation of the setting of the religious symbol. 492 U.S. 573, 598 (1989). The display at issue in *County of Allegheny* contained only the Nativity scene encased in a “floral frame.” *Id.* at 599. It follows that the *Warner* court would be compelled to view the religious references within A.A.’s Twelve Steps in relation to their “setting,” as the Supreme Court did in *County of Allegheny*, before determining that A.A. is a religious organization. *Id.* Otherwise, any organized group could conceivably incorporate the concept of God, even superficially, within its bylaws or motto, and enjoy the constitutional status of a religious organization. Such a course would render the Establishment Clause as meaningless as the neck verse, which was abolished in 1707. See *Potter*, *supra*, at 363.

70 *Warner*, 115 F.3d at 1075.

71 *Id.* Looking beyond the Twelve Steps, the *Warner* court stated the following:

The A.A. program to which Warner was exposed had a substantial religious component. Participants were told to pray to God for help in overcoming their affliction. Meetings opened and closed with group prayer. The trial judge reasonably found that it “placed a heavy emphasis on spirituality and prayer, in both conception and in practice.” We have no doubt that the meetings Warner attended were intensely religious events.

*Id.* (emphasis added). In a footnote following the above passage, the *Warner* court noted that the district court had focused much of its attention on the prayers at the A.A. meetings in question. *Id.* n.6.
court disregarded the fact that each of the 100,766 A.A. groups currently operating worldwide is entirely autonomous,72 needs only two people to exist73 and completely controls the content and format of its meetings.74 Thus, the Second Circuit’s determination that, as a matter of law, A.A. in its entirety is a religious organization sweeps aside one of the crucial support structures enabling A.A. to exist and succeed—its antidogmatism.75 Despite the label affixed by the Second Circuit, A.A. continues to hold itself out as a loosely organized secular society comprised of groups of alcoholics gathered for the sole purpose of removing alcohol from their lives.76

72 See supra note 44 (quoting A.A.’s fourth and seventh traditions).
73 See TWELVE STEPS AND TWELVE TRADITIONS, supra note 32, at 146-47. A.A.’s sponsorship method and tradition four suggest that at least two people are necessary to form a “group.” See id. There are, however, “lone” members who maintain contact with the General Service Office in New York. This Is AA, supra note 50, at 19. Furthermore, A.A.’s explanation of tradition three states that a person is a member of A.A. if she “says so.” TWELVE STEPS AND TWELVE TRADITIONS, supra note 32, at 139. The desire to stop drinking is the only requirement. Id.
74 TWELVE STEPS AND TWELVE TRADITIONS, supra note 32, at 146 (“[E]very A.A. group can manage its affairs exactly as it pleases.”).
75 A complete analysis of the Warner decision is beyond the scope of this note. While the author does not entirely agree with the Second Circuit’s decision, he does accept the decision’s precedential value in recognizing A.A. as a religious organization.

Alcoholics Anonymous is a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism.

The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking. There are no dues or fees for A.A. membership; we are self-supporting through our own contributions. A.A. is not allied with any sect, denomination, politics, organization or institution; does not wish to engage in any controversy; neither endorses nor opposes any causes. Our primary purpose is to stay sober and help other alcoholics achieve sobriety.
C. The Sheep Follows the Shepherd Down the Slippery Slope

By extending New York’s religious privilege to protect communications within A.A., the Southern District of New York offers a glimpse of the potentially far-reaching problems that will inevitably arise from the Second Circuit’s *Warner* decision. On December 6, 1994, Paul Cox was convicted of a double homicide he had committed six years before in Westchester County, N.Y. In 1988, Mr. Cox, after an evening of heavy drinking, entered his former childhood residence and repeatedly stabbed Shanta Chervu and her husband Lakshman Rao Chervu with one of their own kitchen knives. A palm print and a fingerprint were the only pieces of physical evidence left at the scene of the crime. Despite committing the acts in what he later claimed was the midst of an alcoholic blackout, Mr. Cox had the wherewithal to dispose of the weapon and his bloody clothes upon returning home, where he lived with his parents. The crime remained unsolved for several years.

In 1990, Mr. Cox began attending A.A. meetings. During the course of his recovery, Mr. Cox revealed to “at least eight fellow A.A. members” his belief that he had killed the Chervus. He later claimed that his blackout on the night of the murders prevented him from knowing for a fact that he was the killer.

Alcoholics Anonymous can also be defined as an informal society of more than 2,000,000 recovered alcoholics in the United States, Canada, and other countries.

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*Id.*

77 Cox v. Miller, 154 F. Supp. 2d 787, 792 (S.D.N.Y. 2001); Warner v. Orange County Dep’t of Prob., 115 F.3d 1068 (2d Cir. 1996).
76 Cox v. Miller, 154 F. Supp. 2d at 788.
79 *Id.*
80 *Id.* at 789.
81 *Id.*
82 *Id.*
83 *Id.*
84 *Id.* at 789-90.
85 *Id.*
Still, he made no effort to dispel the uncertainty. Among those in whom Mr. Cox confided his secret was Ms. H, who lived with Mr. Cox and attended A.A. meetings with him. After Mr. Cox told Ms. H of his questionable past, Ms. H divulged this information to her psychologist, who then advised her to seek the advice of counsel. On the advice of her attorney, Ms. H then told the district attorney what she knew. The law enforcement authorities questioned the other A.A. members and, based on the information gained, established the probable cause necessary to arrest Mr. Cox. Mr. Cox was charged with and convicted of

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86 Id.
87 See id. at 790 (noting that the prosecutor and the trial court maintained the anonymity of the testifying A.A. members by identifying them by the first letter of their last name).
88 Id.
89 Id.
90 Id.
91 Although this note focuses on the Cox court’s determination that communication within A.A. is privileged, the Cox opinion is troubling for other reasons. Ultimately, the court granted Mr. Cox habeas corpus based on its finding that Mr. Cox’s fingerprints, procured solely as a result of probable cause established by the compelled statements of his fellow A.A. members, were, thus, wrongfully obtained. Cox, 154 F. Supp. 2d at 792, 793. Because the fingerprint and palm print Mr. Cox left behind were the only pieces of physical evidence linking him to the crime, the court determined that without that evidence law enforcement would have been unable to establish the probable cause necessary to arrest Mr. Cox in the first place. Id. Consequently, the court held that the evidence should have “been suppressed as ‘fruit of the poison tree.’” Id. (quoting, without attribution, Nardone v. United States, 308 U.S. 338, 341 (1939)).

Justice Frankfurter, in Nardone, first coined the poetic metaphor to which the Cox court referred. Nardone, 308 U.S. at 341. Since then, the term has been used to illustrate the principle that information gathered from evidence wrongfully obtained is tainted and, thus, inadmissible. See, e.g., Florida v. White, 526 U.S. 559, 565-66 (1999) (holding that a warrantless search did not violate the criminal defendant’s Fourth Amendment rights and, thus, the evidence obtained therefrom was not tainted); Harrison v. United States, 392 U.S. 219, 222 (1968) (holding that a criminal defendant’s testimony was tainted, and thus inadmissible, when “impelled” by the desire to overcome the effects of illegally obtained confessions); People v. Powers, 732 N.Y.S.2d 779, 780 (N.Y. App. Div. 2001) (holding that “oral admission” offered by a
manslaughter in the first degree and sentenced to a maximum of fifty years in prison. The Appellate Division of the New York Supreme Court affirmed the conviction, and the Court of Appeals of New York denied Mr. Cox leave to appeal. Mr. Cox then petitioned the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York for a writ of habeas corpus on the grounds that, inter alia, law enforcement authorities had no probable cause to arrest him absent the A.A. members’ testimony, use of which Mr. Cox claimed violated his constitutional rights under the First and Fourteenth Amendments. Specifically, Mr. Cox

Whether the “fruit of the poison tree” principle applies to privileged communication, however, is unclear. At least one court has observed that “no court has ever applied this theory to any evidentiary privilege.” United States v. Marashi, 913 F.2d 724, 731 n.11 (9th Cir. 1990) (refusing to address a claim that evidence allegedly procured as the result of violations of the spousal privilege should be suppressed); see also United States v. Squillacote, 221 F.3d 542, 560 (4th Cir. 2000) (discussing and quoting Marashi with approval). For support, the Marashi court looked to United States v. Lefkowitz, which stated in a footnote that information obtained indirectly from privileged communication, when the privilege was not constitutionally grounded, such as the marital privilege, would not be considered tainted. Marashi, 913 F.2d at 731 n.11. See Lefkowitz, 618 F.2d 1313, 1319 n.8 (9th Cir. 1980). The Cox court’s summary disposition of the matter, therefore, was disingenuous, and the issue, though beyond the scope of this note, is ripe for the picking.

92 Cox, 154 F. Supp. 2d at 788; see also N.Y. PENAL LAW § 125.20 (Consol. 2002) (defining and proscribing first degree manslaughter).
94 People v. Cox, 728 N.E.2d 985 (N.Y. 2000).
95 See U.S. CONST. amend. I; U.S. CONST. amend. XIV. The First
argued that communication with A.A. members was confidential and protected by New York’s religious privilege. 96 Based on the Second Circuit’s holding that A.A. is a religious organization, 97 the district court concluded that the Establishment Clause could not sustain applying the religious privilege to other established religions and not A.A., a judicially established religion. 98 Consequently, the court granted Mr. Cox his writ, though it withheld issuance until the Second Circuit could review the district court’s decision. 99 Presently, the judicially established church of A.A. still stands, and the Cox opinion will surely serve as a measuring stick to see how far the Second Circuit will allow the Warner opinion to slide down the slippery slope. 100

II. WHY LAW AND POLICY MUST REMOVE THE GAG FROM A.A.

The Cox decision is the first in the nation to apply the Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, ratified in 1791, reads, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.” U.S. CONST. amend. I. The Fourteenth Amendment, ratified in 1868, reads, in pertinent part, as follows:

All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside. No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive a person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.

U.S. CONST. amend. XIV, § 1.

96 Cox, 154 F. Supp. 2d at 790.
97 Warner v. Orange County Dep’t of Prob., 115 F.3d 1068 (2d Cir. 1996).
98 Cox, 154 F. Supp. 2d at 792 (“There is no principled basis for a court to hold that A.A. is a religion for Establishment Clause purposes, and yet that disclosure of wrongs to a fellow member as ordained by the Twelve Steps does not qualify for purposes of a privilege granted to other religions similarly situated.”).
99 Id. at 793.
100 Warner, 115 F.3d 1068.
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religious privilege to communication within A.A. 101 Given that numerous organizations have adopted A.A.’s Twelve Steps, 102 it is likely that they will be recognized as religious organizations as well. 103 Consequently, if the Cox opinion is accepted, the religious privilege would also apply to these groups. This must not happen. The Cox decision is based on faulty factual analysis and legal reasoning, and public policy demands that the religious privilege not be extended to communications between A.A. members. 104

101 Cox, 154 F. Supp. 2d 787.
103 See, e.g., Kerr v. Farrey, 95 F.3d 472, 480 (7th Cir. 1996) (holding that N.A. is a religious organization).
104 See infra Part II.B (discussing the policy implications of the Cox decision).
A. Dismantling Cox

The district court’s decision in Cox is flawed for a number of reasons. It not only mischaracterizes A.A.’s structure and methods, but it also completely overlooks a Supreme Court limitation on the judiciary’s ability to develop evidentiary privileges, thus ignoring the obvious boundaries of the religious privilege. Similarly, although the court quotes the New York statute granting the religious privilege, it then misinterprets a New York decision in order to circumvent the explicit legislative requirements. As a result, the Cox court establishes a precedent with no legal, logical or social support whatsoever.

1. Misunderstanding A.A.

The Cox opinion makes several statements describing A.A. in a way that could only have resulted from misunderstanding the organization and the principles that have ensured its survival and notable success. Although it is questionable whether and how far courts should delve into a particular organization’s doctrine, the Second Circuit’s opinion in Warner established precedent for doing so, at least with respect to determining whether an organization is, in fact, religious. The Cox court followed the Second Circuit’s example, even to the extent of not fully analyzing A.A.’s doctrine before arriving at its unfortunate conclusion.

105 See infra Part II.A.3 (discussing the restraints on the federal judiciary in developing evidentiary privileges).

106 Cox, 154 F. Supp. 2d at 790; see also N.Y. C.P.L.R. 4505 (McKinney 2001). The New York statute requires a communication to be of a confessional or confidential nature revealed to a member of the clergy who is acting in her professional capacity as a spiritual advisor. Id.


108 See supra note 25 (noting A.A.’s size in terms of members).

109 Warner v. Orange County Dep’t of Prob., 115 F.3d 1068, 1070 (2d Cir. 1996) (discussing the references to “God” in the Twelve Steps).

110 See Cox, 154 F. Supp. 2d at 789.
Beginning with the statement “initially A.A. was a self-help group which did not consider or represent itself as an established religion, but helped many Alcoholics, who continued to belong to and worship with their own churches or other religious groups while belonging to A.A.,” the Cox court reveals all too quickly the inadequacy of its inquiry. The quoted sentence implies two false facts: (1) A.A. now considers itself to represent a religion, and (2) A.A. members are necessarily religious and affiliated with a church. These are boldly inaccurate assumptions. While some courts may have intervened to dub A.A. a religious organization, A.A. has always held itself out as secular and has never endorsed any religion. Furthermore, the members of A.A. do not necessarily belong to a religious organization, as A.A. welcomes anyone seeking sobriety regardless of his or her theological beliefs. Thus, the district court’s initial

The Twelve Steps must be accomplished one by one, beginning with the first step. A new member will be sponsored and assisted by one or more existing members of the organization. Members interact on a first name basis only. The entire relationship is both anonymous and confidential. Members are forbidden from telling outside statements made at a meeting. The eighth step requires the new member to have “made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all.” Step five, preliminary to step eight, required that the new member have “admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.”

Id. (quoting the Twelve Steps) (alterations in original). It is interesting to note that, while the district court treated A.A.’s Twelve Steps as though they were binding on the members and enforced by the organization, the fact that Mr. Cox revealed his secret to no fewer than eight fellow A.A. members, as opposed to simply “another human being,” as the court emphasized, seems not to have caused the court any hesitation. Cox, 154 F. Supp. 2d at 789-90.

111 Id. at 789 (emphasis added).
112 See supra note 53 (discussing cases that have found A.A. to be a religious organization).
113 ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS, supra note 36, at xx; 44 Questions, supra note 50, at 19; This Is AA, supra note 50, at 7.
114 See TWELVE STEPS AND TWELVE TRADITIONS, supra note 32, at 139; see also supra Part I.B (discussing the gradual judicial perception of A.A. as a religious organization despite A.A.’s contrary position and its provision of interpretive guidance for atheist members).
characterization is clearly incorrect.

Having set the pace, the Cox court stays on a misguided course throughout its opinion, stating that A.A. members are “forbidden” from revealing statements made at the meetings,\textsuperscript{115} that A.A. “impos[ed]” its discipline on Mr. Cox,\textsuperscript{116} and that the organization requires the Twelve Steps to be followed in a particular manner.\textsuperscript{117} Although anonymity might be a driving force behind A.A.’s success, as with the other traditions, the extent to which A.A. members maintain anonymity is entirely self-determined.\textsuperscript{118} A.A. makes no demands; therefore, it cannot forbid its members from discussing the meetings or the information conveyed therein.\textsuperscript{119} Similarly, A.A. lacks the desire and the authority to impose itself on anyone.\textsuperscript{120} Nor does A.A. attempt to dictate to members how they must work through the Twelve Steps.\textsuperscript{121} Rather, A.A. expressly states that individuals

\textsuperscript{115} Cox, 154 F. Supp. 2d at 789.

\textsuperscript{116} Id.

\textsuperscript{117} Id. ("The Twelve Steps must be accomplished one by one.").

\textsuperscript{118} See TWELVE STEPS AND TWELVE TRADITIONS, supra note 32, at 184. The anonymous nature of A.A. was initially meant to protect alcoholics who, for various reasons, wanted to conceal their association with the group. Id. Hence, A.A. members refer to one another by only their first name and last initial. Understanding Anonymity, pamphlet P-47, at 10 (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., 1981). For example, A.A. literature refers to one of its cofounders, Mr. Wilson, as Bill W. See, e.g., id. at 7. Mr. Wilson and Dr. Smith were aware of the consequences being labeled an alcoholic could have on businesspeople, professionals, and those desiring to maintain a particular social status. Id. at 5. In the 1930s and 40s, when A.A. was a fledgling organization and the disease of alcoholism was not well understood, people were wary of the social stigma of being associated with an organization for recovering alcoholics. Id. at 5-7. Although much more is now known, A.A.’s principle of anonymity is still important in light of the social stigma that persists today. Id.; see also supra note 44 (quoting A.A.’s twelfth tradition).

\textsuperscript{119} TWELVE STEPS AND TWELVE TRADITIONS, supra note 32, at 129 ("No A.A. [sic] can compel another to do anything; nobody can be punished or expelled.").

\textsuperscript{120} Id.

\textsuperscript{121} See 44 Questions, supra note 50, at 16 ("The absence of rules, regulations, or musts is one of the unique features of A.A. as a local group
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should accomplish the steps in whatever manner they feel comfortable.\textsuperscript{122} A.A.’s Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions are merely suggestions for those seeking sobriety.\textsuperscript{123} A member has no obligation to A.A., legal or otherwise, other than those she may create for herself.\textsuperscript{124} Consequently, the A.A. member is—or was, before Cox—free to tell the world everything that happened at the meetings.\textsuperscript{125} Although the member who does this may not feel welcome at future meetings with the same group, any effort to exclude her would violate many, if not all, of A.A.’s principles.\textsuperscript{126}

\textsuperscript{122} Id.

\textsuperscript{123} See TWELVE STEPS AND TWELVE TRADITIONS, supra note 32, at 129. Although theoretically true, A.A.’s explanation of tradition one states that A.A. members will eventually come to realize on their own that the steps are necessary for the alcoholic’s survival. Id. at 130-31.

\textsuperscript{124} Id. at 129.

\textsuperscript{125} Id. The Cox opinion strips A.A. members of their ability to participate in the criminal justice system by reporting known criminal activity as is expected of responsible citizens. See infra Part II.B (discussing the policy implications of the Cox decision). The psychological effects of this judicial segregation could cost recovering alcoholics their sobriety. See, e.g., Kathleen T. Brady & Susan C. Sonne, The Role of Stress in Alcohol Use, Alcoholism Treatment, and Relapse, 23 ALCOHOL RES. & HEALTH, No. 4, 263-71 (1999) (noting a relation between the physiological effects of stress, social factors and alcohol relapse); James R. McKay, Studies of Factors in Relapse to Alcohol, Drug and Nicotine Use: A Critical Review of Methodologies and Findings, 60 J. OF STUD. ON ALCOHOL, No. 4, at 566 (1999) (stating that the various methodologies all conclude that, \textit{inter alia}, interpersonal and emotional issues contribute to relapse).

\textsuperscript{126} See generally TWELVE STEPS AND TWELVE TRADITIONS, supra note 32. One of the underlying principles of A.A. is the acceptance of flawed individuals. Id. at 139. A.A. explains tradition three:

\textit{A.A. is really saying to every serious drinker, “You are an A.A. member if you say so. You can declare yourself in; nobody can keep you out. No matter who you are, no matter how low you’ve gone, no matter how grave your emotional complications—even your crimes—we still can’t deny you A.A.”}

\textit{Id.} Thus, A.A. serves as a den of equality, where persons admittedly at the lowest point in their lives can seek the support of others without fear of being judged. \textit{Id.} Breaching an obligation some members may view as sacred
2. Cox Misinterprets the New York Court of Appeals

Beyond mischaracterizing A.A., the Cox opinion overstates the applicability of the New York decision in People v. Carmona.\textsuperscript{127} In Carmona, the New York Court of Appeals discussed the applicability of the religious privilege to communications between the defendant, who was a confessed killer, and two ministers.\textsuperscript{128} Without making reference to the religion practiced by the ministers who had spoken to the defendant, the Carmona court discussed the evolution of the religious privilege, stressing its modern-day application to communications taking place beyond the realm of the Catholic confessional.\textsuperscript{129} The Carmona court stated that the privilege applies to confidential communication with ministers of all religions, and that the only test for determining whether the communication is privileged is “whether the communication in question was made in confidence and for the purpose of obtaining spiritual guidance.”\textsuperscript{130} The status of the ministers in Carmona, however, was never in question; therefore, the issue was neither discussed nor dismissed as unnecessary.

In contrast, the chief issue before the Cox court was whether A.A. members are “professional . . . spiritual advisor[s]”\textsuperscript{131} as required by New York’s religious privilege.\textsuperscript{132} The district court in Cox quoted verbatim much of the Carmona court’s discussion,

\textsuperscript{127} 627 N.E.2d 959 (N.Y. 1993).
\textsuperscript{128} Id.
\textsuperscript{129} Id. at 961.
\textsuperscript{130} Id. at 962.
\textsuperscript{131} N.Y. C.P.L.R. 4505 (McKinney 2001).
\textsuperscript{132} Id. The lack of treatment afforded the issue, however, suggests otherwise. See infra II.A.4 (discussing the Cox court’s conversion of A.A. in order to apply the religious privilege).
relying heavily on the usurped text and little else. In doing so, the Cox opinion ultimately afforded too much weight to a largely inapposite case.

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133 See Cox v. Miller, 154 F. Supp. 2d at 791 (S.D.N.Y. 2001). The Cox court quoted the following passage from Carmona:

Although often referred to as a “priest-penitent” privilege, the statutory privilege is not limited to communications with a particular class of clerics or congregants. Nor is it confined to “penitential admission[s] . . . of a perceived transgression” or “avowals made ‘under the cloak of the confessional.’” On the contrary, in enacting CPLR 4505, the Legislature intended to recognize “the urgent need of the people to confide in, without fear of reprisal, those entrusted with the pressing task of offering spiritual guidance” without regard to the religion’s specific beliefs or practices. While the privilege may have “ha[d] its origins in the Roman Catholic sacrament of Penance, in which a person privately confesses his or her sins to a priest [and t]he priest is enjoined by Church law . . . to maintain the confidentiality of the confession,” the New York statute is intentionally aimed at all religious ministers who perform “significant spiritual counseling which may involve disclosure of sensitive matters.” Indeed, the drafters of the current codification struck the concluding phrase from the predecessor provision, which made the privilege applicable to communications made “in the course of discipline, enjoined by the rules or practice of the religious body to which he belongs” because the phrase was ambiguous and rendered it “doubtful whether the rule applies to any confessions other than those to a Catholic priest.” Accordingly, what is more appropriately dubbed the “cleric-congregant” privilege is applicable to ministers of all religions, most of which have no ritual analogous to that of the Catholic confession. Despite the concurrence’s “four canon” analysis, New York’s test for the privilege’s applicability distills to a single inquiry: whether the communication in question was made in confidence and for the purpose of obtaining spiritual guidance.

Id. (internal citations omitted) (emphasis added).

134 See generally Carmona, 627 N.E.2d 959. More recent New York cases demonstrate that Carmona did not eliminate the requirement that the communication be made to a member of the clergy as the Cox court implies. See, e.g., Lightman v. Flaum, 761 N.E.2d 1027, 1031 (N.Y. 2001) (noting that New York’s religious privilege “applies to confidential communications made by congregants to clerics of all religions”) (citing Carmona, 627 N.E.2d 959).
3. **Testimonial Privileges Should Be Strictly Construed**

The *Cox* opinion disregards the limitations the Supreme Court has placed on the federal judiciary’s ability to develop evidentiary privileges.\(^{135}\) In *Trammel v. United States*,\(^{136}\) the Supreme Court

\(^{135}\) See generally *Cox*, 154 F. Supp. 2d 787. The *Cox* opinion quotes N.Y. C.P.L.R. 4505 and discusses one New York case addressing the statute. *Id.* at 790-91. The district court, however, made no reference to Federal Rule of Evidence 501, which provides the federal judiciary the ability to create and develop evidentiary rules “except as otherwise required by the Constitution of the United States or provided by Act of Congress or in rules prescribed by the Supreme Court.” FED. R. EVID. 501. Nor did the court address Federal Rule of Evidence 1101(c), which states, “The rule with respect to privileges applies at all stages of actions, cases, and proceedings.” FED. R. EVID. 1101(c); see also FED. R. EVID. 1101(c) advisory committee’s note (stating that “singling out the rules of privilege for special treatment, is made necessary by the limited applicability of the remaining rules”). The conclusion that the *Cox* court should have incorporated federal law into its opinion is further supported by *Duckworth v. Owen, II*, a case in which the Supreme Court denied certiorari to a state prisoner convicted of state crimes who claimed that the Seventh Circuit, in an unpublished opinion, erred in holding that the Federal Rules of Evidence, and not a particular state’s (in that case, Indiana’s) evidentiary rules, apply in a federal habeas decision. 452 U.S. 951, 951 (1981). Although the Supreme Court’s denial contains no textual material, the dissenting opinion is enlightening. *See id.* at 951 (Rehnquist, J., dissenting). Noting that whether the federal rules of evidence applied in this case was the only question presented, the dissent states, “No one would disagree with the conclusion of the Court of Appeals that Indiana rules of evidence do not apply in a federal habeas proceeding.” *Id.* at 953 (emphasis added); see also *Procella v. Beto*, 319 F. Supp. 662, 670 (S.D. Tex. 1970) (noting, in a case involving a state prisoner convicted of state crimes, that “federal evidentiary rules govern federal habeas corpus hearings”). In a case with issues similar to *Cox*, *Edney v. Smith*, Judge Jack Weinstein reviewed a state prisoner’s petition for habeas corpus grounded on a claim that the trial court violated his Sixth Amendment rights by allowing his psychiatrist to testify against him. 425 F. Supp. 1038 (E.D.N.Y. 1976). The petitioner argued that the court violated the state physician-patient privilege, which he claimed was of a constitutional nature. *Id.* at 1039. Noting that the privilege did not exist at common law but that most states had adopted the privilege, Judge Weinstein looked to federal law regarding the physician-patient privilege to determine whether the petitioner’s claim had merit. *Id.* at 1039-45.
curtailed the right of a husband to prevent his wife from voluntarily testifying against him by claiming spousal privilege.137
In so doing, the Court described the restraint courts should exercise in the development of evidentiary privileges:

Testimonial exclusionary rules and privileges contravene the fundamental principle that the public . . . has a right to every man’s evidence. As such, they must be strictly construed and accepted only to the very limited extent that permitting a refusal to testify or excluding relevant evidence has a public good transcending the normally

Not only did the Cox court fail to address the applicable federal statutory guidelines, the court also failed to address the primary Supreme Court decision that limits judicial involvement in the creation or expansion of evidentiary privileges. See Trammel v. United States, 445 U.S. 40, 50 (1980) (admonishing federal courts to narrowly construe evidentiary privileges). Furthermore, the Cox court made no indication whatsoever as to the standard of review the court was applying. See generally Cox, 154 F. Supp. 2d 787.


137 Prior to 1980, Hawkins v. United States was the controlling case with respect to the federally established spousal privilege. Trammel, 445 U.S. at 41, 42 (calling for a re-examination of Hawkins); see also Hawkins, 358 U.S. 74 (1958). In Hawkins, the Court acknowledged the longstanding common-law rule that husbands and wives were incompetent to testify either for or against one another. Id. at 74, 75. The Court then pointed out that Funk v. United States had altered the common law rule somewhat by allowing spouses to testify for each other. Hawkins, 358 U.S. at 76; see also Funk, 290 U.S. 371 (1933). The Hawkins Court stated, however, that Funk did not alter the rule that spouses could not testify against one another. Hawkins, 358 U.S. at 76. Upholding this rule and refusing to distinguish between compelled and voluntary testimony, the Court held that in the interest of protecting the sanctity of marriage, one spouse would not be permitted to testify even voluntarily against the other. Id. Despite government arguments that a marriage involving a spouse willing to testify against the other was already doomed, the Court refused to allow government action to catalyze divorce and stated that “adverse testimony given in criminal proceedings would, we think, be likely to destroy almost any marriage.” Id. at 78. Noting both the state legislative trend of altering the spousal privilege to allow spouses to voluntarily testify against one another and the accepted state practice of offering a spouse immunity from prosecution for testifying against the other spouse, the Trammel Court modified Hawkins to allow spouses to voluntarily testify against one another. Trammel, 445 U.S. at 53.
predominant principle of utilizing all rational means for ascertaining the truth.  

Not only did the Cox opinion fail to address the Trammel decision, the district court also ignored the principle adopted therein by the Supreme Court. Had the district court made any effort to “strictly construe[]” New York’s religious privilege as Trammel requires, it could not have determined that the members of A.A. qualify as clergy. Even ignoring other jurisdictions’ applications of the privilege, which might also have persuaded the court to alter its course, it would be difficult to argue that the New York legislature would consider A.A. members clergy when it expressly requires Christian Science practitioners to be “duly accredited” for the privilege to apply. Rather than follow legislative limitations and realism to their logical ends, however, the district court took it upon itself to ordain more than a million unsuspecting A.A. members.

4. Forcing a Square Peg into a Round Hole

The Cox court applied Carmona in an effort to circumvent the statutory requirement that the person with whom the communication is made be a “clergyman, or other minister of any religion or duly accredited Christian Science practitioner.” This requirement, however, is not completely ignored. The district court satisfied itself by finding, without explanation, that members of A.A. are “ordained by the Twelve Steps” and that “all members exercise the office of clergyman.” Thus, the court found that the Establishment Clause, which at a minimum

138 Id. at 50.
139 Id. Trammel requires federal courts to consider whether expanding the particular privilege would serve a “public good transcending the normally predominant principle” of discovering the truth. Id. This note concludes that expanding the religious privilege to speech within A.A. causes more public harm than good.
141 See supra note 25 (noting A.A.’s size in terms of members).
prohibits the government from preferring one religion over another, requires the religious privilege to apply to A.A. just as it applies to the “traditionally recognized forms” of religion.\textsuperscript{144}

The Cox court characterizes A.A. members as clergy in order to apply the religious privilege, yet fails to clearly elucidate its rationale for doing so.\textsuperscript{145} Like a parent arguing with a child, the court supports its position with an unarticulated, “because I said so.” Any effort to explain further would have revealed the court’s unjustifiable reasoning. The court proceeds as follows: (1) assuming a communication occurs with the requisite reasonable expectation of confidentiality, the religious privilege protects communication with a Catholic priest acting in his professional capacity,\textsuperscript{146} (2) the government cannot show a preference for Catholicism, a “traditional” form of religion, over A.A., an organization newly designated as religious;\textsuperscript{147} therefore, (3) the religious privilege must apply to A.A.\textsuperscript{148}

Viewed separately, each point lacks controversy. The first, however, that the privilege applies to a priest acting in his

\textsuperscript{144} Id. Interestingly, the Cox court notes that “it is possible as a matter of Constitutional law to have and to practice a religion without having a clergyman as such, or where all members exercise the office of clergyman . . .” Id. at 787. Although this might be correct, research has yet to reveal any statute granting the religious privilege or any court applying the religious privilege when the communication concerned someone who was not a member of the clergy. The religious privilege, therefore, should not apply when the religion recognizes no spiritual leaders. Perhaps this is why the Cox court determined, without hinting to its rationale, that A.A. falls into the latter category. Id. Even if the court had offered an explanation, it would still be hard pressed to find support for its assumption that the privilege would apply to all members of a religion that viewed each member as clergy. \textit{See In re Grand Jury Investigation}, 918 F.2d 374, 385 n.13 (3d Cir. 1990) (\textquotedblleft[W]e do not intimate that the privilege should be interpreted to comprehend communications to and among members of sects that denominate each and every member as clergy.\textquotedblright).

\textsuperscript{145} See Cox, 154 F. Supp. 2d at 792.

\textsuperscript{146} Id. at 790 (noting that the New York statutory privilege “has its historical origin in the Roman Catholic church”).

\textsuperscript{147} Id. at 792.

\textsuperscript{148} Id.
professional capacity, does not lead logically to the second, that
the privilege applies to a particular religion. Rather, the first
point demonstrates that the privilege applies to communication
with a particular individual who is recognized by a religious
institution as one qualified to offer spiritual advice. In other
words, the fact that the privilege would apply to qualified
communication with a priest demonstrates the religious
privilege’s individual applicability. Communication with a
Catholic priest is protected, as is communication with a cleric
within the Protestant, Jewish, and Muslim religions. To then
conclude the privilege applies to Catholicism, Protestantism,
Judaism and Islam and, therefore, must apply to A.A. without
reference to anyone recognized by A.A. as a spiritual advisor
converts the privilege from a principle applying individually to
one having an organizational application. If this were true, the
privilege would expand uncontrollably, applying not only to the
priest, but also to the church secretary or perhaps even to
communication between two parishioners. This not only defeats
the limiting principle adopted by the Supreme Court in
\textit{Trammel},
but it also diminishes the authority of the fifty state legislatures,
each of which have adopted a definition of clergy that requires
more than a mere desire to lend a sympathetic ear.

\footnote{149} All of the statutory religious privileges apply to persons within
religions, not religions categorically. \textit{See supra} note 3 (citing state statutes
confering the religious privilege).

\footnote{150} \textit{See supra} note 1 (discussing legislative attempts to enumerate the
leaders of religions to whom the religious privilege would apply).

\footnote{151} \textit{See, e.g.,} \textit{CAL. EVID. CODE} § 1033 (Deering 2001) (defining clergy as
“a priest, minister, religious practitioner, or similar functionary of a church or
of a religious denomination or religious organization”); \textit{CONN. GEN. STAT.} §
52-146b (2001) (limiting Connecticut’s privilege to confidential
communication with “a clergyman, priest, minister, rabbi or practitioner of
any religious denomination accredited by the religious body to which he
belongs who is settled in the work of the ministry”); \textit{OR. REV. STAT.} §
40.260 (2001) (defining a clergy member as “a minister of any church,
religious denomination or organization or accredited Christian Science
practitioner who in the course of the discipline or practice of that church,
denomination or organization is authorized or accustomed to hearing
confidential communications and, under the discipline or tenets of that church,
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Judicial interpretations of the religious privilege also support the notion that more is needed for a person to qualify as clergy. Although they have been unwilling to identify any specific requirements, courts should limit the application of the religious denomination or organization, has a duty to keep such communications secret”).

In *In re Verplank*, a California district court found that communication between college students and counselors qualified for the religious privilege. 329 F. Supp. 433, 436 (C.D. Calif. 1971). A minister ordained by the United Presbyterian Church who had been hired to counsel students regarding the Vietnam draft had recruited non-ordained counselors to assist him with what became an overly burdensome task. *Id.* at 434-36. To determine whether the privilege protected communication between the students and the non-ordained counselors, the court looked to the advisory committee’s notes for proposed Federal Rule of Evidence 506 and found that the non-ordained counselors’ work conformed sufficiently with that of an ordained minister of an “established Protestant denomination to the extent necessary to bring [the counselors] within the privilege covering communication to clergymen.” *Id.; see also Proposed Federal Rules of Evidence, supra* note 7, at 84. In *Rutledge v. State*, the Supreme Court of Indiana refused to apply the privilege when the communication in question occurred between an inmate and a member of the Gideons, an organization of businessmen who passed out Bibles. 525 N.E.2d 326 (Ind. 1988). The Gideon member in this case regularly spoke with inmates about the Bible and “being forgiven for their sins.” *Id.* at 327. The makeup of the organization and the fact that it was not affiliated with any church were the chief factors persuading the court that the privilege was inapplicable. *Id.* at 328. The Supreme Court of Iowa, in *Reutkemeier v. Nolte*, determined that confidential communication with the elders of a Presbyterian church was privileged. 161 N.W. 290 (Iowa 1917). The elders, the court found, held a position within the church equal to that of the minister, who was also an elder. *Id.* at 292-94. Elected by the members of the congregation, the church elders were together responsible for governing the church affairs and were often called to carry out duties of the minister when no acknowledged minister was available. *Id.* at 293. These characteristics proved persuasive. *Id.* The Iowa Supreme Court later refused to apply the privilege to communications that transpired between a criminal defendant and his brother, despite the defendant’s claim that he looked to his brother for spiritual guidance. See *State v. Alspach*, 524 N.W.2d 665 (Iowa 1994). The court found that the brother did not qualify as clergy, regardless of the defendant’s perceptions. *Id.* at 668; *see also Manous v. State*, 407 S.E.2d 779, 782 (Ga. Ct. App. 1991) (finding that a self-proclaimed psychic was not a member of the clergy as defined by Georgia’s religious privilege).
privilege to situations involving a cleric who is recognized by the religious organization to which that person belongs as one qualified to provide spiritual guidance.153

Perhaps recognizing this, the Cox court was compelled by its desired outcome to determine that A.A. members are clergy.154 Again, this conclusion ignores many of A.A.’s defining characteristics. The central A.A. organization recognizes no leaders.155 A.A. has no formal structure other than its services

153 See, e.g., Reutkemeier, 161 N.W. at 292-94 (examining the literature and doctrine of the Presbyterian Church to determine if the church viewed the elders as clergy to whom the religious privilege applies). Furthermore, such a requirement is implied by the various statutory definitions of spiritual advisors. See, e.g., ALA. CODE § 12-21-166 (2001) (defining “clergyman” as “any duly ordained, licensed or commissioned minister, pastor, priest, rabbi or practitioner of any bona fide established church or religious organization and shall include and be limited to any person who regularly, as a vocation, devotes a substantial portion of his time and abilities to the service of his respective church or religious organization”); HAW. R. EVID. 506 (2001) (“A member of the clergy is a minister, priest, rabbi, Christian Science practitioner, or other similar functionary of a religious organization . . . .”); 735 ILL. COMP. STAT. 5/8-803 (2001) (defining clergy as “a clergyman or practitioner of any religious denomination accredited by the religious body to which he or she belongs”); N.Y. C.P.L.R. 4505 (McKinney 2001) (requiring, for purposes of the religious privilege, Christian Science practitioners to be “duly accredited”); R.I. GEN. LAWS § 9-17-23 (2001) (prohibiting a “duly ordained minister of the gospel, priest, or rabbi” from revealing confidential communications).

154 The Cox court’s grossly inaccurate description of A.A. and its holding without reasoning that A.A. members are “ordained” by the Twelve Steps lead to this observation. See Cox, 154 F. Supp. 2d 787, 792 (S.D.N.Y. 2001); see also supra Part II.A.1 (discussing the Cox court’s factual findings with respect to A.A.’s relationship with its members).

155 See supra note 44 (stating A.A.’s ninth tradition, which allows for the creation of “service boards or committees”); see also The A.A. Group, pamphlet P-16, at 23 (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., 1990) (describing the members of these committees as “officers” who are “usually . . . chosen by the group for limited terms of service. As Tradition Two reminds us, ‘Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern.’ These jobs may have titles. But titles in A.A. do not bring authority or honor; they describe services and responsibilities.”).
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board, no requirements for either individual members or the groups’ internal leaders other than the desire to recover from alcoholism, no training of any sort for anyone within the organization, and, most importantly, no recognition by the organization of any individual in a position to provide counseling, spiritual or otherwise, other than to offer personal experience to help guide others to sobriety. It is clear,

156 See Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, supra note 32, at 146-49.
157 Supra note 44 (stating A.A.’s third tradition). Although A.A. suggests that a member wishing to sponsor another alcoholic first attain several months of sobriety, there are, in fact, no requirements or restrictions with respect to who can become a sponsor. See Questions and Answers on Sponsorship, pamphlet P-15, at 10 (Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc., 1983). “There is no superior class or caste of sponsors in A.A. Any member can help the newcomer learn to cope with life without resorting to alcohol in any form.” Id. at 13.
158 Id. at 10.

An A.A. sponsor does not provide any such services as those offered by a social worker, a doctor, a nurse, or a marriage counselor. A sponsor is simply a sober alcoholic who helps the newcomer solve one problem: how to stay sober.

And it is not professional training that enables a sponsor to give help—it is just personal experience and observation.

159 Id. A.A. has grown through the years partly as a result of its founders’ belief that once A.A. members achieve sobriety, they should help others reach the same goal. See supra note 41 (stating A.A.’s twelfth step). This method evolved into what A.A. now refers to as “sponsorship.” See generally Questions and Answers on Sponsorship, supra note 157. A.A. describes sponsorship as “an alcoholic who has made some progress in the recovery program shar[ing] that experience on a continuous, individual basis with another alcoholic who is attempting to attain or maintain sobriety through A.A.” Id. at 7. At first glance, the support provided by a sponsor may appear to parallel that of a clergy member. The guidance sponsors provide, however, is severely curtailed by two limiting factors. Sponsors receive no formal training whatsoever in either alcohol recovery or spiritual matters. Id. And, although sponsors may share the same end—sobriety—their spiritual beliefs may differ greatly from those to whom they provide help, as membership mandates only the desire to stop drinking and does not depend on any particular religious beliefs. See supra note 44 (stating A.A.’s third tradition).
therefore, that an A.A. member is not qualified by A.A. to provide spiritual guidance.\textsuperscript{160} Furthermore, since A.A. membership requires neither sobriety nor adherence to the Twelve Steps, finding that A.A. members are somehow ordained is puzzling, to say the least.\textsuperscript{161}

The \textit{Cox} decision must falter beneath the weight of appellate level scrutiny. Its perception of A.A. is misguided at best, as is its interpretation of the New York Court of Appeals’ \textit{Carmona} decision.\textsuperscript{162} These initial misunderstandings and an obviously scattered rationale led the district court to ordain A.A. members, burdening them with an unsolicited privilege, the breadth of which now conflicts with Supreme Court and state legislative dictates.

\textbf{B. A Legal Crack in A.A.’s Foundation}

The impact the \textit{Cox} decision will have on A.A. members should give any advocate of A.A. and similar groups cause for concern. First, the \textit{Cox} court erects yet another barrier between sponsors and A.A. members. Sponsors are struggling with their own sobriety and are under no obligation to work through the Twelve Steps before sponsoring another member, though A.A. does encourage sponsors to first become sober. \textit{Questions and Answers on Sponsorship}, supra note 157, at 13-14. Yet, no matter how long a sponsor may be sober, A.A. recognizes that even sponsors, by the very nature of alcoholism, are at risk of slipping from sobriety. See, e.g., \textit{Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions}, supra note 32, at 113-14 (discussing the danger of relapse that accompanies many of life’s disappointments). The organization, therefore, incorporates what it calls the “24-hour plan,” which reminds alcoholics of their powerlessness and discourages even members who have long been sober from making claims of future sobriety. \textit{This is AA}, supra note 50, at 14. The “24-hour plan” encourages members to focus only on staying sober for the next twenty-four hours. \textit{Id.}

\textsuperscript{160} A situation where an individual A.A. group looks to a particular member as a spiritual leader would serve as a better example of when the religious privilege might apply. Nonetheless, the district court in \textit{Cox} did not limit its opinion to particular cases. \textit{See generally} Cox v. Miller, 154 F. Supp. 2d 787 (S.D.N.Y. 2001).

\textsuperscript{161} \textit{Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions}, supra note 32, at 139. (“The only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking.”).

\textsuperscript{162} People v. Carmona, 627 N.E.2d 959 (N.Y. 1993).
alcoholics and active participation in society, which is already complicated by the unpopular social stigma accompanying alcoholism. It accomplishes this by forcing upon them a “privilege” that prevents A.A. members from testifying to information gained within the A.A. setting and precludes law enforcement from utilizing any information provided voluntarily by A.A. members. Thus, A.A. members are prohibited from carrying out duties commonly associated with being a good citizen. Second, the court creates what some jurisdictions have deemed a fiduciary relationship, the breach of which can result

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163 TWELVE STEPS AND TWELVE TRADITIONS, supra note 32, at 184-87 (stating that part of the reason anonymity is so important to members is a fear of the social stigma that might be attached); see also Understanding Anonymity, supra note 118, at 5-6 (discussing the need for anonymity).

164 Cox, 154 F. Supp. 2d at 792-93 (holding that the evidence gathered from the information the A.A. members provided should have been suppressed).

165 See Roberts v. United States, 445 U.S. 552, 557 (1980) (“The citizen’s duty to raise the hue and cry and report felonies to the authorities was an established tenet of Anglo-Saxon law at least as early as the 13th Century.”) (internal quotations omitted); Roviaro v. United States, 353 U.S. 53, 59 (1957) (noting that the government’s ability to conceal an informer’s identity is necessary in light of citizens’ duty “to communicate their knowledge of the commission of crimes to law-enforcement officials”); United States v. Jefferson, 252 F.3d 937, 940 (7th Cir. 2001) (“[C]itizens have an obligation to communicate their knowledge of the commission of crimes to law enforcement officials.”); Lighthourne v. Dugger, 829 F.2d 1012, 1020 (11th Cir. 1987) (noting “the duty that is imposed upon all citizens to report criminal activity”); United States v. Cowan, 396 F.2d 83, 87 (2d Cir. 1968) (“It is an act of responsible citizenship for individuals to give whatever information they may have to aid in law enforcement.”) (quoting Miranda v. State of Arizona, 384 U.S. 436, 477-78 (1966)) (internal quotations omitted). But see United States v. Zimmerman, 943 F.2d 1204, 1214 (10th Cir. 1991) (“It is well established that a person who sees a crime being committed has no legal duty to either stop it or report it.”).

166 See, e.g., BLACK’S LAW DICTIONARY 626 (6th ed. 1990) (defining “fiduciary or confidential relation” as broadly “embracing . . . technical fiduciary relations and . . . informal relations which exist wherever one person trusts in or relies upon another” and stating that “[s]uch relationship arises whenever confidence is reposed on one side, and domination and influence result on the other; the relation can be legal, social, domestic, or merely
in civil liability. Consequently, the Cox court has determined

personal”).

By determining that A.A. members are clergy, the Cox court also sets
a precedent for other jurisdictions to impose civil liability on either A.A.
members whose breach of confidentiality is considered a breach of a fiduciary
duty or possibly on A.A. itself. See, e.g., Martinelli v. Bridgeport Roman
Catholic Diocesan Corp., 196 F.3d 409, 430-32 (2d Cir. 1999) (upholding the
trial court’s finding of a fiduciary relationship between the plaintiff and the
Diocese and holding that the First Amendment does not bar claims against
religious organizations for breach of fiduciary duties); Sanders v. Casa View
Baptist Church, 134 F.3d 331, 338 (5th Cir. 1998) (holding that the First
Amendment does not bar claims against clergy for either malpractice or breach
of fiduciary duties); Doe v. Hartz, 52 F. Supp. 2d 1027, 1061-62 (N.D. Iowa
1999) (stating that whether a spiritual counselor has a legally cognizable
fiduciary duty “depends upon factual circumstances, not upon professional
standards of conduct for the average reasonable member of the clergy” and
holding that breach of fiduciary duty claims against clergy are not “barred ab
initio”).

Although these cases arise in the context of claims of sexual abuse, at
least one court has acknowledged the possibility of a duty arising from a
The plaintiff in F.G. brought claims against a church rector and his assistant.
Id. at 699-700. Like the courts above, the claim against the church rector
arose from allegations of sexual misconduct. Id. at 700. The claim against the
rector’s assistant, also a member of the clergy, however, concerned a letter he
published detailing the facts of the relationship between the plaintiff and the
rector and circulated to the members of the congregation. Id. The plaintiff
claimed she had revealed the details to the assistant rector in confidence. Id. at
701. The court held that, generally, the First Amendment does not bar a claim
against a clergy member for breach of fiduciary duties. Id. at 703. Thus, the
court upheld the claim against the rector for breach of fiduciary duties with
respect to the sexual relationship. Id. at 705. Furthermore, the F.G. court held
that the claim against the assistant for breach of confidentiality would stand if
the trial court could determine the existence of a breach by referring to
nonreligious, “neutral principles.” Id. But see Lann v. Davis, 793 So. 2d 463,
465-66 (La. Ct. App. 2001) (holding that a claim against a clergy member for
breach of fiduciary duty equated to a claim for clergy malpractice and, as
such, was barred by First Amendment); Teadt v. Lutheran Church Mo.
Synod, 603 N.W.2d 816, 822-24 (Mich. Ct. App. 1999) (refusing to create a
fiduciary duty for clergy, stating that such a duty would be impossible to
define); Lightman v. Flaum, 761 N.E.2d 1027, 1032 (N.Y. 2001) (holding
that New York’s religious privilege did not create a fiduciary duty); Langford
that alcoholic criminals who wish to unburden their souls have a greater right to recover from their affliction than do those alcoholics in whom the criminals wish to confide. Cox allows alcoholics to reveal their criminal secrets to fellow alcoholics who might not be psychologically capable of maintaining a relationship requiring confidentiality.168 This could prove instrumental to recovering criminals, whose unburdened consciences are free to focus on remaining sober, yet detrimental to recovering confidants.169 Thus, Cox turns on its head the principle that those who fail to live by society’s standards sacrifice their interests in freedom to forward the interests of the

168 See Cox, 154 F. Supp. 2d at 790. The facts of Cox demonstrate the plausibility of an A.A. confidant who is unable to carry the burden of confidentiality encouraged by A.A. Id. Ms. H, struggling with what Mr. Cox had told her, felt compelled to reveal the information to her own psychologist. Id. Thus, it follows that if the criminal A.A. member divulges criminal secrets to a non-criminal A.A. member precluded by law from revealing this information, the criminal A.A. member is, arguably, benefited by unburdening his soul while the non-criminal A.A. member must bear the weight of harboring knowledge of the confessor’s crimes. See generally Julie D. Lane & Daniel M. Wegner, The Cognitive Consequences of Secrecy, 69 J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL. 237 (1995) (discussing the psychological effects of harboring secrets).

169 As if overcoming alcoholism were not difficult enough, the confidant struggling with her own sobriety now must either sacrifice her civic duty to disclose criminal activity or face potential civil liability should she be unable to carry out the duty created by Cox. See supra note 167 (discussing decisions finding a clergy fiduciary duty). Such a psychological dilemma may well undermine the recovering alcoholic’s sobriety. See, e.g., Brady & Sonne, supra note 125; Sandra A. Brown et al., Severity of Psychosocial Stress and Outcome of Alcoholism Treatment, 99 J. ABNORMAL PSYCHOL. 344, 344-48 (1990) (distinguishing between the effects of severe and mild stress on the ability of the alcoholic to remain abstinent and finding, inter alia, that alcoholics who relapsed after treatment had experienced more severe stress than the subjects who did not relapse); McKay, supra note 125, at 566.
non-criminals in attaining a crime-free society.\textsuperscript{170} Public policy cannot support the proposition that criminals have a superior interest in sobriety than non-criminals.\textsuperscript{171}

By expanding the religious privilege to communication within A.A., the \textit{Cox} court usurped the A.A. member’s control over her own recovery.\textsuperscript{172} If \textit{Cox} is persuasive, A.A. members in jurisdictions recognizing a spiritual advisor’s fiduciary relationship will no longer decide for themselves whether to maintain the confidential relationships encouraged by A.A.\textsuperscript{173} Largely as a result of A.A.’s unwillingness to apply pressure to its members and its support of individual autonomy,\textsuperscript{174} A.A.’s methods have been “extremely successful internationally, [resulting in] more than a million members in the United States alone.”\textsuperscript{175} Now, the responsibility to maintain confidentiality has been forced upon them by a decision that is overly confident in an alcoholic’s ability to maintain both confidentiality and sobriety.

A person afflicted with the disease of alcoholism always risks

\textsuperscript{170} Imprisonment is a key method for protecting society from those who commit criminal acts. \textit{See} U.S. Dep’t of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics, \textit{Jail Statistics}, \url{http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/jails.htm} (last visited Feb. 23, 2002) (stating that the nation’s local jails held 621,149 prisoners in mid-2000); \textit{see also} Dep’t of Justice Bureau of Justice Statistics, \textit{Prison Statistics}, \url{http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/prisons.htm} (last visited Feb. 23, 2002) (stating that as of December 31, 2000, 1,381,892 prisoners were under the control of the federal or state prison systems).

\textsuperscript{171} Were this not true, the criminal justice system would transmogrify; for if criminals have a greater interest in sobriety, it follows that they have a superior interest in liberty as well. \textit{See supra} note 170 (stating the number of criminals being held in local jails and state and federal prisons).

\textsuperscript{172} \textit{See supra} Part II.A (discussing A.A.’s relationship with its members).

\textsuperscript{173} \textit{See supra} note 167 (discussing cases finding a fiduciary duty for clergy).

\textsuperscript{174} \textit{Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions}, \textit{supra} note 32, at 173 ("Neither its General Service Conference, its foundation board, nor the humblest group committee can issue a single directive to an A.A. member and make it stick, let alone mete out any punishment.").

drinking again. Medical studies on alcoholism have shown that stress is a major factor contributing to a recovering alcoholic’s slip from sobriety. Of course, every alcoholic is different. Some may be able to handle a lot of stress. Others may slip easily from sobriety as the result of simple, day-to-day pressures. The act of keeping a secret itself may serve as the proverbial straw. The law has now determined that all alcoholics within A.A. are capable of coping with the stress of knowing and not being able to reveal that a fellow member has committed atrocities for which they have not been held accountable. Prior to Cox, A.A. encouraged confidentiality but never guaranteed it; therefore confidentiality could never be

176 See, e.g., Billie Jay Sahley & Katherine M. Birkner, Alcoholism and Its Treatment, TOWNSEND LETTER FOR DOCTORS AND PATIENTS, July 1, 2000, at 62 (“The greatest majority of alcoholics cannot become social drinkers again because they tend to relapse into heavy drinking.”).

177 See Brady & Sonne, supra note 125; Brown et al., supra note 169; McKay, supra note 125.

178 See Brady & Sonne, supra note 125.

179 See id.

180 See Lane & Wegner, supra note 168, at 239.

Thought suppression and intrusive thoughts occur cyclically, each in response to the other. Secrecy sets the stage for the formation of a feedback system in which each attempt to suppress the secret produces intrusive thinking of that very secret, which in turn engenders increased efforts at thought suppression. This process can quickly turn into a self-sustaining cycle in which obsessive preoccupation with thoughts of the secret develops. Once this preoccupation cycle is set into motion, moreover, removing secrecy from the equation will not necessarily stop the obsessive preoccupation with the secret. After the person has identified the thought of a secret as intrusive and unwanted, suppression can maintain the intrusiveness (and the intrusiveness can maintain the suppression). Secrecy’s cognitive consequences may persever long after the secrecy itself is gone.

Id.

181 Supra note 168 (discussing the potential psychological impact the Cox decision could have on non-criminal alcoholics attempting to recover through A.A.).
reasonably expected.\textsuperscript{182} That fact by itself should preclude expanding the religious privilege to A.A.\textsuperscript{183}

The law now, in effect, demands that members of A.A. guarantee confidentiality and, as a result, has determined that the criminal’s interest in sobriety supercedes that of the non-criminal A.A. member.\textsuperscript{184} Public policy cannot tolerate such a distortion of the legal system. It is also quite possible that A.A., as it has existed since 1939, will be unable to tolerate the pressure now being applied as a matter of law. This result would certainly prove harmful to society’s interests, contravening both utilitarian principles\textsuperscript{185} and Supreme Court precedent.\textsuperscript{186} Applying the

\textsuperscript{182} Not only would the Constitution leave the law powerless to force a religion to guarantee confidentiality, but the fact that a person in such a situation could have no expectation of confidentiality also would mandate against applying the religious privilege, which requires just such an expectation. See United States v. Wells, 446 F.2d 2, 4 (2d Cir. 1971) (upholding the trial court’s decision to admit into evidence an inmate’s letter to a priest when the letter contained no indication that it was meant to remain confidential).

\textsuperscript{183} Although the parameters of the privilege vary somewhat from state to state, each statute granting the privilege requires an expectation of confidentiality. See supra note 3 (listing the state statutes).

\textsuperscript{184} See supra notes 168-69 and accompanying text.

\textsuperscript{185} See, e.g., In re Grand Jury Investigation, 918 F.2d 374, 383 (3d Cir. 1990) (“[T]he privilege protecting communications to members of the clergy, like the attorney-client and physician-patient privileges, is grounded in a policy of preventing disclosures that would tend to inhibit the development of confidential relationships that are socially desirable.”); see also J.S. Mill, UTILITARIANISM 55 (Roger Crisp ed., Oxford University Press 1998) (1863) (“The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.”). In his introductory analysis of Mill’s work, Roger Crisp summarizes the Greatest Happiness Principle by explaining that “the ultimate end is the greatest balance of pleasure over pain, to be assessed by competent judges. This being the end of human action, it is also the end of morality, which consists of those rules that will best further the end.” Id. at 37. John Henry Wigmore’s four criteria for protecting confidential communications, discussed infra Part III, which have been applied in numerous jurisdictions, are described as utilitarian. See, e.g., Am. Civil Liberties Union of Miss., Inc. v. Finch, 638 F.2d 1336, 1344 (5th Cir. 1981) (“This Court adopted Wigmore’s
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religious privilege to A.A. communication, therefore, is unsupported by both law and public policy.

III. RESPONDING TO CRITICS

Supporters of expanding the religious privilege to A.A. generally invoke Dean Wigmore’s criteria for recognizing an evidentiary privilege. They also argue that A.A. members essentially function as clergy and, therefore, deserve similar treatment. Finally, some have expressed concern that without the protection of the religious privilege A.A. will suffer by becoming an easily accessible law enforcement tool. While this
fear is not entirely irrational, expanding the religious privilege is excessive and ultimately unnecessary in light of the constitutional protection afforded all religious organizations.

A. Dean Wigmore’s Criteria Fail to Support Protecting A.A. Communication

Dean Wigmore identified four criteria he viewed as necessary to establish an evidentiary privilege:

1. The communications must originate in a confidence that they will not be disclosed.
2. This element of confidentiality must be essential to the full and satisfactory maintenance of the relation between the parties.
3. The relation must be one which in the opinion of the community ought to be sedulously fostered.
4. The injury that would inure to the relation by the disclosure of the communications must be greater than the benefit thereby gained for the correct disposal of litigation.  

In the A.A. context, however, attempting to apply the four criteria requires a level of speculation that could not be tolerated in light of the public policy argument discussed in Part II. First, whether an expectation of confidentiality can exist within A.A. is highly uncertain. As has already been noted, A.A. has no authority over its members, who are free to follow or dismiss A.A.’s suggestions. See TWELVE STEPS AND TWELVE TRADITIONS, supra note 32, at 173. “Groups have tried to expel members, but the banished have come back to sit in the meeting place, saying ‘This is life for us; you can’t keep us out.’” Id. Nowhere in the Twelve Steps or Twelve Traditions is the word or concept of confidentiality mentioned. See
individuals for failing to follow its suggestion that communication be considered confidential. Nor should society assume that alcoholics, by attending A.A. meetings, are willing to subject themselves to the responsibilities that accompany the confidential relationship.

Next, it is unclear whether the expectation of confidentiality is necessary for the relationships within A.A. to survive. Although some evidence suggests that people are more honest when guaranteed confidentiality, A.A. has never guaranteed confidentiality; therefore, it cannot be argued that a lack of such a guarantee would negatively affect A.A.’s membership or effectiveness. In fact, it is equally reasonable to assume that the members of A.A. require and relish the freedom from the responsibility of having to harbor the knowledge of the criminal deeds of another. The founders of A.A. recognized the need to not pressure the alcoholic. The law, far less knowledgeable in such matters, is in no position to determine otherwise.

Regarding the fourth criterion, prohibiting A.A. members

supra note 41 (listing A.A.’s Twelve Steps); see also supra note 44 (listing A.A.’s Twelve Traditions).

192 TWELVE STEPS AND TWELVE TRADITIONS, supra note 32, at 173.

193 See supra Part II.A.1 (discussing A.A.’s relationship with its members).

194 See supra note 191 (discussing A.A.’s lack of authority over its members); see also Alcoholics Anonymous, The Importance of Anonymity, at http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org/english/E_FactFile/M-24_d9.html (last visited Feb. 23, 2002) (“An A.A. member may, for various reasons, ‘break anonymity’ deliberately at the public level. Since this is a matter of individual choice and conscience, the Fellowship as a whole obviously has no control over such deviations from tradition.”).

195 Furthermore, there is equally compelling evidence that some secrets are better unrevealed. See Anita E. Kelly & Kevin J. McKillop, Consequences of Revealing Personal Secrets, 120 PSYCHOL. BULL., No. 3, 450-65 (stating that revealing secrets, which is largely considered therapeutically beneficial, may actually damage the confessor when the secret revealed causes the confidant to react negatively).

196 See supra note 191 (discussing A.A.’s lack of authority over its members).

197 See Twelve STEPS AND TWELVE TRADITIONS, supra note 32, at 129 (stating that A.A. has no rules).
from revealing knowledge of criminal behavior would actually prove harmful to recovering alcoholics, who may be emotionally unable to handle the burden the religious privilege places on them. The privilege, therefore, actually injures those the Cox court may have been trying to protect. Any injury that may result to the personal relationship between A.A. members can hardly compare. Compounded with the barrier evidentiary privileges place between courts and the truth they seek, it is difficult to see any benefits arising from imposing the religious privilege on A.A. members.

Ultimately, the third criterion is the only one that survives analysis. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to argue that A.A. does not benefit society. Although A.A. keeps no detailed records of membership, the organization claims to have millions of members throughout the world. Alcoholism is a source of crime, misery, and physical illness that can lead to self-destruction and death. Likewise, alcoholism poses enormous economic costs on society. Because A.A. reduces those costs while imposing no realizable social costs of its own, society should “sedulously foster[]” A.A. and the relationships that develop therein. Nevertheless, the satisfaction of this criterion alone cannot justify applying the religious privilege to communications within A.A.

198 See supra note 25 (noting A.A.’s size in terms of members).
199 See Jill Neimark et al., Back from the Drink, PSYCHOL.TODAY, Sept. 1994, at 46 (stating that in the United States each year, 40,000 people die from alcoholism and that alcoholism is implicated in 30% of suicides overall and 46% of suicides among teenagers).
200 Id. (stating that the monetary costs to the country are $80 billion annually).
201 Id.; see also J.H. Wigmore, supra note 190, at § 2285.
202 J.H. Wigmore, supra note 190, at § 2285.

Only if these four conditions are present should a privilege be recognized. That they are present in most of the recognized privileges is plain enough; and the absence of one or more of them serves to explain why certain privileges have failed to obtain the recognition sometimes demanded for them.

Id.
B. Courts Do Not Adhere to the Functionalist Approach

Commentators also argue that the religious privilege should apply to A.A. based on the purpose A.A. members serve each other. Since A.A. members provide essentially the same service as clergy members, the argument goes, A.A. members should enjoy a similar right to privileged communication. In addition to the myriad reasons why A.A. members are not the equivalent of clergy, the functionalist approach, in light of the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Trammel*, suffers from a more obvious deficiency—the proverbial slippery slope. That is to say, accompanying the functionalist rationale is the potential for burdensome litigation seeking to further expand the privilege. For example, litigants have already tried to argue—that the religious privilege applies to a psychic or to family members to whom a person may look for spiritual guidance. If the religious privilege did apply to such relationships, one could then argue, for example, that the lawyer-client privilege should apply to a criminal seeking legal advice from a bail bondsman. Such arguments would burden the courts tremendously by forcing them to create exceptions in order to administer justice, when, as *Trammel* clarifies, the administration of justice is the rule and protected communication the

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203 See AMERICAN HERITAGE DICTIONARY, supra note 68, at 734 (defining “Functionalism” as follows: “(1) The doctrine that the function of an object should determine its design and materials; (2) A doctrine stressing purpose, practicality, and utility.”).

204 See Reed, supra note 30, at 737 (analogizing A.A. members and clergy); Weiner, supra note 30, at 270-72 (discussing “the functionalist rationale” for extending the religious privilege to A.A.).

205 See supra note 204 (citing commentators proffering this view).

206 See supra Part II.4 (distinguishing A.A. members from members of the clergy).

207 See Manous v. State, 407 S.E.2d 779, 782 (Ga. Ct. App. 1991) (holding that the religious privilege did not apply to communication between a criminal defendant and his psychic); State v. Alspach, 524 N.W.2d 665, 668 (Iowa 1994) (holding that a criminal defendant’s brother did not qualify as clergy despite defendant’s view of his brother as a spiritual advisor).
C. Extending the Privilege Is Unnecessary

Finally, creating explicit legal protection for speech within A.A., although already shown to violate public policy, is a drastic and unnecessary solution to a problem not yet proven to exist. In addition to the utilitarian and functionalist positions discussed, some believe that the Cox trial exemplifies the abuse that will result without the privilege. Although Ms. H voluntarily approached the district attorney to reveal the information Mr. Cox had told her, the others within Mr. Cox’s A.A. group were forced to testify. Critics arguing for application of the religious privilege to A.A. claim that such a measure is necessary to prevent prosecutors from abusing their position by subpoenaing A.A. members and compromising A.A. confidentiality. Yet, in their haste, these critics forget about Ms. H and other A.A. members whose dedication to maintaining the confidential relationships encouraged by A.A. is secondary to their psychological well-being. Furthermore, the six-and-a-half-year interim between Mr. Cox’s conviction, which was reported nationwide, and his grant of *habeas corpus* offered no

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208 See supra Part II.A.3 (discussing Trammel v. United States, 445 U.S. 40 (1980)).

209 See supra Parts III.A-B (discussing and dismissing the various rationales for extending the religious privilege to communication within A.A.).

210 See supra note 189 (noting the alarmist concern that failure to protect communication within A.A. will result in the organization’s demise).

211 See Reed, supra note 30, at 700 (stating that the Cox conviction was the first incident where A.A. members were compelled to testify).

212 See supra note 189 (noting the alarmist concern that failure to protect communication within A.A. will result in the organization’s demise).

213 Cox v. Miller, 154 F. Supp. 2d 787, at 790 (S.D.N.Y. 2001) (stating that Ms. H first revealed to her psychologist the information Mr. Cox had told her).

214 See, e.g., Geraldine Baum, *Whether in a Support Group, Therapy or Church, People Seek Comfort in Anonymous Confession*, L.A. TIMES, June 24, 1994, at E1; Editorial, *Confidentiality Not Guaranteed in All Kinds of*
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indication that the critics’ concerns of overzealous, encroaching prosecutors are remotely realistic.215

Nevertheless, the possibility of a situation like Cox arising again is not beyond comprehension, and the social benefits A.A. confers certainly weigh in favor of protecting those A.A. members who view confidentiality as fundamental to their recovery.216 Clearly, extending the religious privilege to A.A. risks compromising the spirit of freedom and autonomy ingrained in nearly every aspect of one of the world’s most successful self-help organizations.217 Conversely, absent the privilege, A.A. members remain free from the pressures the privilege creates, free to focus on becoming and remaining sober and, if they so choose, free to preserve the confidential, anonymous relationships encouraged by A.A.218 Assuming the Second and Seventh Circuit decisions recognizing twelve step programs as religious organizations are upheld and found persuasive elsewhere,219 the Constitution will protect A.A. members from abusive law enforcement.220


215 See Reed, supra note 30, at 700 (stating that the Cox conviction was the first incident where A.A. members were compelled to testify). Research has thus far uncovered no other cases where A.A. members were forced to testify or where law enforcement officials were accused of infiltrating A.A. meetings.

216 See supra Part III.A (discussing Dean Wigmore’s criteria for establishing an evidentiary privilege).

217 See supra Part I.A (discussing the history of A.A.).

218 See supra note 118 (discussing the theory behind A.A.’s principle of anonymity).

219 See Warner v. Orange County Dep’t of Prob., 115 F.3d 1068 (2d Cir. 1996); Kerr v. Farrey, 95 F.3d 472 (7th Cir. 1996).

220 See, e.g., Thomas v. Review Bd. of the Ind. Employment Sec. Div., 450 U.S. 707, 718 (“The state may justify an inroad on religious liberty by showing that it is the least restrictive means of achieving some compelling state interest.”); see also, Wisconsin v. Yoder, 406 U.S. 205, 234-35 (1972) (holding that the state could not compel defendants, Amish parents, to send their children to school past the eighth grade when such practice violated their
The Free Exercise Clause of the Constitution prevents courts from compelling A.A. members to testify with respect to information revealed in the practice of their “religion.” This is true to the extent that the government has no compelling interest and cannot accomplish its ends through a means tailored to protect fundamental First Amendment rights. In Wisconsin v. Yoder, the Supreme Court stated, “Only those interests of the highest order and those not otherwise served can overbalance legitimate claims to the free exercise of religion.” Relying on the Constitution will not only protect A.A. members in a fashion similar to the religious privilege, but it also will protect those A.A. members who long to be free from the restraints the religious privilege imposes.

religious beliefs).

221 U.S. CONST. amend. I; see supra note 53 (discussing cases equating A.A. with religion).

222 See supra note 220 (citing cases discussing government infringement of the free exercise of religion).

223 Yoder, 406 U.S. at 215.

224 Obviously, not every member is dedicated to the principle of confidentiality within A.A. That is not to say that no A.A. members adhere to a self-imposed obligation to maintain the confidential relationship out of a belief that it is fundamental to the practice of A.A.’s Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions. In Thomas, the Supreme Court addressed a similar situation. 450 U.S. 707. The plaintiff in Thomas was a Jehovah’s Witness who had been employed in the steel industry. Id. at 710. Originally, he had been involved in the fabrication of sheet steel. Id. But when the company he worked for closed his division, Mr. Thomas was transferred to a division requiring him to participate in the manufacturing of tank turrets for the military. Id. According to Mr. Thomas, his religion would not permit him to contribute directly to the manufacture of armaments, though he felt that he could be involved in the production of materials that may find their way to military use more indirectly. Id. at 711. Not all within his religion were in agreement. Id. at 710. A fellow Jehovah’s Witness had told Mr. Thomas that working on weapons did not violate his religion’s doctrine. Id. Mr. Thomas was nonetheless convinced, and his convictions caused him to ask to be laid off. Id. When this request was refused, he quit and sought unemployment benefits. Id. The matter found its way to the Supreme Court of Indiana, which held that a denial of benefits did not violate the Free Exercise Clause when the belief claimed to have been infringed was nothing more than a “personal philosophical choice.” Thomas v. Review Bd. of the Ind. Employment Sec.
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CONCLUSION

Although the Cox opinion will not likely be affirmed on appeal and Mr. Cox will remain in prison to pay for his crimes, the district court’s bewildering decision provides a glimpse of what the future may hold for A.A. and other groups adopting the Twelve Steps. The legal system seems increasingly intent on viewing A.A. as a sectarian organization. While the Warner and Farrey decisions arguably are the grossest examples of the establishment of religion, they seem less so when confined to their facts. Although the Second Circuit in Warner distinguished between the religious events at A.A. and a prayer at a high school graduation, it would be wise for the court to readdress this aspect and reconsider its position. Analogizing A.A. meetings that incorporate religious aspects with a public school attempting to incorporate a prayer would result in less confusion while reaching the identical end sought, preventing the government from endorsing religion in the broadest sense of the

Div., 391 N.E.2d 1127, 1131 (Ind. 1979). Reversing the Indiana court’s decision, the Supreme Court held, inter alia, that it was not necessary for Mr. Thomas’ belief to comport with the beliefs of other Jehovah’s Witnesses for his belief to rise to a religious status. Thomas, 450 U.S. at 715, 716.

Intrafaith differences of that kind are not uncommon among followers of a particular creed, and the judicial process is singularly ill equipped to resolve such differences in relation to the Religion Clauses. One can, of course, imagine an asserted claim so bizarre, so clearly nonreligious in motivation, as not to be entitled to protection under the Free Exercise Clause; but that is not the case here, and the guarantee of free exercise is not limited to beliefs which are shared by all of the members of a religious sect.

Id.

225 See supra Part I.B (discussing the gradual judicial perception of A.A. as a religious organization despite A.A.’s contrary position and its provision of interpretive guidance for atheist members).

226 See Warner v. Orange County Dep’t of Prob., 115 F.3d 1068 (2d Cir. 1996); Kerr v. Farrey, 95 F.3d 472 (7th Cir. 1996).

227 Warner, 115 F.3d at 1076 (citing Lee v. Weisman, 505 U.S. 577 (1992), which found that non-sectarian prayer given at a public high school graduation violated the Establishment Clause).
Whether the Second or Seventh Circuits do ultimately limit their views on this issue, the fact remains that the religious privilege is inapplicable in the A.A. context. Although the courts may choose to maintain the view that A.A. is a religion, it should be viewed as a religion without recognized leaders or spiritual advisors. In light of congressional and Supreme Court limitations on the development of evidentiary privileges and common sense reading of state religious privileges, unless the various legislatures decide otherwise, protecting communication within A.A. should be left to the Constitution’s Free Exercise Clause. The Cox court chose to ignore Congress and the Supreme Court, and its application of New York law was disingenuous, to say the least. Furthermore, its effects could be disastrous for the millions of people whose very survival depends on A.A. The Cox opinion should, therefore, serve the legal community not as a persuasive argument or precedent, but as a mistake not to be repeated.

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228 Weisman, 505 U.S. at 589 (“The First Amendment’s Religion Clauses mean that religious beliefs and religious expression are too precious to be either proscribed or prescribed by the State.”).

229 See supra Parts II-III (discussing the numerous reasons why the religious privilege should not be extended to communication within A.A.).

230 See supra Part II.A.4 (distinguishing between A.A. members and members of the clergy).