Dios me Salva:

Alcoholism and Religion as Rehab in a Highland Maya Town

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SOAN 295
3/11/2013
Abstract: Alcoholism is one of the most pervasive social epidemics affecting the Maya of Guatemala. It is a learned response to hundreds of years of colonial exploitation, a lasting result of which has been a lasting result of which has been a high level of poverty within the indigenous population of Guatemala. In the highland community of Santa Catarina Palopò, however, religion seems is actively addressing the issue of alcoholism. This study analyzes how the presiding religious institutions of Catholicism and Evangelism, attend to the psychological and social well-being of the population of Santa Catarina Palopò through discourses and policies that effectively combat the use of abuse and alcohol use and abuse of alcohol. I finally relate these discourses back to a clinical setting, where spirituality is being used as a primary tool in overcoming addiction.

Introduction and Goals of Study

The Tat Loy Rehabilitation House rises like a ship out of the main street of San Lucas Tolimán, Guatemala on the edge of a sprawling Lake Atitlán. Perched upon a dusty street corner and coated in dingy graying brick and dirt, one would have to read the sign that swings out from above the building’s front door to know what, or rather who, is inside. With a few raps onto the locked metallic door--painted a thick rusted orange--the blunted, hollow ringing might discourage any prospective visitor. After a few moments of bated breath, the door pulls inward. The shadows within fall away in the light of the doorway, revealing an office: draped over in curtains and blankets, floored in a sticky linoleum tile and a man named Tadeo sits at his desk. This is his clinic: in its four years of operation, over 3,000 patients of drug and alcohol addiction have passed in and out of its doors--not surprisingly, as it is the only clinic of its kind in the entire department of Sololá. Passing through the curtained doorways into the back of the building is a room full of the house’s current inhabitants: it is nine am, and forty tired looking men--young and old and from all around the lake’s communities--are in place in their lawn chairs poised to receive the morning’s mensage. The clinic’s newest and youngest patient, Jorge, will take his place at the podium today--it is his turn to share why he is here, to describe his own tumble down a slippery slope into alcohol addiction, and why he too has opened his life to God.
Jorge’s story is not a unique one. He has come to Tat Loy to expunge himself of addiction through the acceptance of religion. Can alcohol consumption and religion serve similar ends? Does religion yield sobriety? Across the lake in Santa Catarina Palopó, where this study centers, there are few families whose lives have not been somehow touched or affected by alcoholism and the domestic abuse that follows as a result. But in the last thirty years, a new sound has joined up with that of a neighbor’s drunken stupor: church bells. The Catholic and Evangelical churches of the town have forged a profound new dynamic regarding alcohol use and the outlook of alcoholics within the community. The Evangelical Church has even been referred to by scholars as the “Alcoholics Anonymous of Maya Indians” (Golden and Metz 1991:325). True, most alcoholics living around Lake Atitlán will never set foot in a rehabilitation clinic: it is much more likely that a visit to church will serve to similar ends on the road to recovery. I add to the existing discussion that religion is a powerful force addressing the issue of alcoholism in Maya communities, by extending the argument for Evangelical success in addressing alcohol abuse, relating it as well to the larger Catholic community, and by considering these spiritual dynamics within an actual clinical rehabilitation setting.¹

After hundreds of years of religious, social, and economic exploitation, alcoholism is a tradition that runs as thick as religion among Maya Indians in highland Guatemala, and actually, in the face of abject poverty, both serve similar social and psychological functions. Where drunkenness was once an important tradition used to complement spirituality, I argue that religion and alcohol now work as competing influences in the lives of Catarinecos, and that religion is now used as an effective tool to combat the abuse of alcohol. This study examines and compares the relationships between alcohol consumption and spirituality as they exist in the Catholic Church, the Evangelical Church, and in Alcoholics Anonymous, and what these relationships mean for the culture of alcoholism that exists in Santa Catarina Palopó.

Methods

¹There is little literature regarding either the Catholic Church’s approach to alcohol abuse and alcoholism, nor is there much literature regarding formal rehabilitation programs in Guatemala.
In February of 2014, I moved to the small Maya community of Santa Catarina Palopó (population 3,000) for a period of three weeks, during which I conducted my fieldwork. I lived with a blossoming young family of three, who though not religious, laid for me a groundwork of the religious dynamic, as well as that of alcohol in the pueblo. My time with this family was very important in gaining an objective perspective on the reality of religion and alcoholism within Santa Catarina Palopó, and from here I was able to mold my approach of study outside of the home.

My task was to examine how two seemingly very separate cultural phenomena forged an important interaction; for this, my fieldwork was composed of two distinct components in the study of religion, and the study of alcohol consumption and addiction. My aim was to locate the overlap, and my discovery was that there almost always was one. My primary methods of fieldwork included a wide range of informal (conversational) interviews with town residents, formal interviews with church officials and participants, and participant observation through the attendance of religious services. My most valuable discussions were those with three different members of the Catholic Church’s *directiva*, and with a pastor within the Evangelical Church. I met with these informants casually after church services or in their homes on a different day. These meetings manifested as both semi-formal interviews or simple, more naturally-flowing conversations. Many of my key insights came from these interviews, but more importantly from my observations within the churches themselves. During my time in Santa Catarina Palopó, I attended a total of four Catholic Church services, and five Evangelical. The Catholic Church in Santa Catarina is split into two sects: Catholicism as defined by Catholic Action, and a subgroup of Charismatic Catholicism. Both sects attend the same masses within the central Cathedral, but the Charismatic Catholics, a significantly smaller population, meet twice more throughout the week after such services in a separate facility. I attended services of both charismatic and traditional types. Because both groups attend the same masses, however, this study will largely consider these two groups similarly, with concessions for the Charismatic use of music in *culto*.

My attendance to Evangelical services, referred to as *cultos*, was isolated to only the largest
Evangelical church (Asamblea de Dios) of the six in Santa Catarina Palopó. While attending a variety of Evangelical churches may have been beneficial for gaining a broader base of understanding, and may have yielded valuable verification to my findings within Asamblea de Dios, two reasons shaped my decision to continue patronage to only one church. First, my host-grandmother attended the Asamblea and liked for me to accompany her, and further, her willingness to escort me allowed my presence to be better received within the church. Second, due to the time-limited nature of my fieldwork in the pueblo, attending only one church instead of many allowed me to delve more deeply into a narrower focus, as well as integrate myself more fully into the church community which I was studying.

While the above-listed methods allowed me to study the idea of alcoholism through a spiritual lens, I also found it important to study the culture of alcoholism from a more standalone perspective. Alcoholism, for the purposes of this study, will be defined as a dependency upon alcohol that impedes with one’s ability to function normally, caused by the exploitation of the psychological benefits and relief received through alcohol consumption. For this, I spent time observing the cantinas located near my house, interviewing--both formally and informally--recovering alcoholics, and I paid two separate visits to an alcohol and drug rehabilitation facility across the lake in San Lucas Tolimán (the only rehabilitation clinic in the department of Sololá) that allowed me valuable opportunities for participant observation, as I sat in on Alcoholics Anonymous discussions, interacted with patients, and toured the facility.

In my study of alcoholism, however, I also faced some serious limitations, in large due to my positionality as a young, white woman. I could not actually pay visits to the cantinas, nor did I feel secure enough to speak with some of the more well established town alcoholics, most of whom were young men normally too drunk to hold any level of conversation anyway. For this, my study of alcoholism within Santa Catarina relied heavily on conversations only with recovering alcoholics, and from stories of hearsay. In other words, I was unable to study the facets of alcoholism that may inhibit or discourage an alcoholic.

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2 This definition is adapted from the understanding of Herbert Barry III in World Anthropology: Cross Cultural Approaches to the Study of Alcohol (249-262).
from seeking help, as the majority of my informants had already sought it, and were on the road to or had attained sobriety.

Not only did my positionality as a young white female pose limitations to my fieldwork, but the tender nature of both alcoholism and religion, especially in light of one another, added to the challenge of research. The topic of my research was a sensitive one. Religion is a very personal thing in any culture, and there are very few people living in Santa Catarina Palopó who have not had alcoholism color their life experience in some way, often tragically. Because of this, I was limited to only specific interview settings for my topic of research, and with the exception of church officials, I found that I needed to have a previously established relationship with my informants in order for them to share more freely with me. In addition to notes taken in participant observation, this study is a result of the conversations made possible through relationships based on trust, and the names in this paper have been changed in order to reflect that.

**Background Information**

The scene is a setting sun over the dusty streets of a tired Santa Catarina: mothers and children have filtered out of the *Calle Principal* and away into the blotch of housing cropping up out of the steep of the mountainside. The last few pickup trucks file out of the streets, away for the evening, and the sounds of the day fall away to the barking of dogs from across the hillsides. A still of muffled activity wafts over the town, until it is broken at about eleven pm. A neighbor, probably an old man sitting on the porch of his decaying home, begins to crack away at the facade of tranquility. He is shouting, screaming, his words and coordination blurred by a nightly routine of drink. His wife, perhaps, can be heard trying to call him; when violence erupts, the neighbors intercede. The old man is shouting, “*Soy un pecador... ¡Soy un pecador!*”

Alcohol, and more specifically alcoholism, is not a new problem for the Maya of Guatemala. The problem of alcoholism in Santa Catarina is one of serious gravity, and its effects are especially visible in a family setting. During my fieldwork in Santa Catarina, I met a great number of single mothers who have been forced to cut their husbands out of their lives as a response to domestic violence, or the husband’s spending habits and inability to keep a job. Why the trend? Guatemala is a country with one of the lowest
gross domestic products in the world, and the result is a poverty often answered by alcohol. The gravity of alcohol abuse is to such an extent that among Maya communities, alcoholism is the greatest burden of disease: liver cirrhosis a most common cause of death (Kanteres, Lachenmeier, and Rehm 2008: 752). We must consider alcoholism as separate from social drinking, but there is an important link. Social drinking is, in the secular community, considered an appropriate pastime, if only for men. Yet, the transition to addiction for most burgeoning alcoholics will develop from this weekend hobby: for many alcoholics these weekend periods of drunkenness were extended gradually, up to fifteen day binges.\(^3\) Although social drinking is accepted, the tendency to sprout an addiction from social drinking has influenced the view of alcohol within the community, and for this many people frown upon any use of alcohol at all.\(^4\) For this reason, religious discourse within the community of Santa Catarina approaches social drinking and alcoholism as very much the same thing, and beyond total from alcohol being part of the Palabra de Dios, social drinking is addressed and discouraged as a preventative measure as it often sprouts dependency.

*Alcohol from Costumbre to Social Toxin*

While this negative opinion of alcohol has indeed come about as a natural response to the pain alcoholism has wrought in the community, it is also a reworking of what was once a rich and important cultural *costumbre* among the highland Maya that deserves some attention.\(^5\) Where alcohol was once an important social and spiritual component of Mayan culture, it is now banned in the Catholic and Evangelical churches, which together have a religious monopoly over the town’s inhabitants. Not many years ago in Santa Catarina, drunkenness was a long standing tradition, used as a powerful tool to complement the experience of religious fulfillment. This manifested first in Maya spiritual ceremonies, where drunkenness facilitated a closer connection to the spiritual realm\(^6\), and then in the system of *cofradia*, where the celebration of Catholic saints entailed a drunkenness to “please the Gods.”

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\(^3\) Information advised by Tadeo of Tat Loy.

\(^4\) Most, if not all, of the recovering alcoholics had developed their dependencies on beer, which is the beverage most commonly consumed in a social setting as well.

\(^5\) See Appendix II

\(^6\) While Maya ceremony and the practice of cosmovision may be alive in other Maya communities, there is only one surviving *ak’ij* in Santa Catarina, and this is how she explained to me the ceremonial use of alcohol.
When Catholic Action ended an ambiguous but evidently significant period of absence from the lake communities about fifty five years ago, the prevalence of alcohol in a spiritual context ended as well. The change and reduction of both costumbre and participation within the cofradía was amplified with the introduction of Evangelism to the area about twenty years later. The churches, which converted residents, even cofrades, on a grand scale, saw the drunkenness taking place within the cofradías as symptomatic of a greater moral spoilage, only naturally, as abstinence from alcohol is in the Palabra de Dios. And actually, the gravity of drunkenness that took place during ferias did in fact shadow the greater tendency for the over-consumption of alcohol among the population, a problem that had developed over centuries. For many of my informants, the social drinking within the cofradia developed into an addiction in much the same way that social drinking in the cantinas spurs dependency today. While my informants’ reflections may have been colored by their current religious and moral affiliations, they also give light to the very real tendency to abuse alcohol in Santa Catarina, no doubt related to the gravity of the poverty and consequent psychological distress experienced on at least some level by every member of the community. The coexistence of alcohol and spirituality in the cofradia was part of a rich tradition, but perhaps changed necessarily, and primarily through the influence of Catholic and Evangelical discourses that are about to be discussed. The Evangelical and Catholic policies of prohibition no doubt contributed to their success in the community of Santa Catarina (among cofrades and otherwise), and today, and both churches actively speak against the use of alcohol in their respective mensajes. For many people, including my informants from the cofradia, the revitalization of a dry Christianity within the community has changed significantly their outlooks for dependency. The burgeoning religious traditions now approach both social drunkenness and alcoholism largely in the same manner, though through very different methods.

**Coexistence Gone: Catholic and Evangelical Discourses on Sobriety**

The religious climate in Santa Catarina is now markedly different, and it includes a universal discourse that has taken on an active role in combating both alcohol use and the problem of alcoholism that

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7 See Appendix II for a thicker ethnographic description of the old role of alcohol and its change.
before simply coexisted alongside the cofradía. Twenty years after the cofradía’s eminence in the community has drawn to a close, spirituality is now viewed as an alternative to alcohol use. The two are mutually exclusive, or so the discourse within the churches claims. The benefits sought through alcohol consumption: ease of anxiety, ease of stress, and social bonding, are all benefits now received similarly through church participation. Alcohol no longer complements spiritual life as during the time of the cofradía, rather, the use of alcohol any degree is technically prohibited within the two religious traditions that now dominate the spiritual life of Santa Catarina Palopó: Catholicism and Evangelism, and both make strides in addressing the problem of alcoholism within the community. While trying to discourage both social drinking, both churches create valuable abstinence from alcohol programs, and through providing in their own way different psychological and social functions that allow people to deal with personal issues often caused by poverty, both churches even function as informal modes of rehabilitation for people who may be seeking sobriety.

“Soy Pecador”: The Catholic Church and Alcohol

On a Sunday evening, it is impossible to escape from the vibrations of music that ring down through the hills from the several pastel-colored Evangelical churches perched high above the town of three thousand. Soon, loyal churchgoers will wind back down the side of the mountain to settle back into their respective homes for the evening; the less raucous Catholic Church has just let out as well. Evangelical and Catholic neighbors will pass each other as they file back into the blocks of neighborhood--they may nod at one another, but chances are that they will not say good evening. An ideological rift runs deep between attendees of the two churches: ask any Evangelical, and he will tell you the moral decay of Santa Catarina comes at the fault of a Catholic. Why? According to one Evangelical pastor, for Catholics “todo es permitido.” Although alcohol use is banned explicitly by Catholic doctrine, it is still used casually among many members of the congregation, even to celebrate such religiously sanctioned occasions as baptisms or

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8 These benefits will be the topic of discussion throughout this paper, and Appendix 1 details these benefits comparatively.
weddings. The Catholic approach to alcohol use is one of a more relaxed prohibition, bolstered through Catholic discourse regarding the nature of sin and the importance of forgiveness.

**Church Participation**

Over seventy percent of the population of Santa Catarina Palopó identifies as Catholic, though a much smaller portion is actually practicing. At a typical Sunday evening mass, just under two hundred people will crowd into the pews of the cathedral that stands prominently in the town’s center square. Most have come with their families; women arrive in their best traje, and their children (most of whom seem to have been dragged here) have been scrubbed for the occasion. The priest stands at the front of the church, ready to dole out the weekly sermon. He has commuted the twenty minute drive from Panajachel to be at the church today; his other day in Santa Catarina is Thursday, when he is present to hear the various confessions of the congregation. The majority of his sermon will be a praise to God, heavy in thanks for current blessings, injected with references to Biblical passages and the important moral laws they mean for us to integrate into our lives. Eventually, the Eucharist of wine and wafers will be offered, though nearly a third of the congregation will refrain from taking it. The mass ends with a period reserved privately for praying, during which children will squirm and the elderly will likely doze off. After the hour and a half is up, the congregation will file back out of the church doors to return to their homes and private lives, and most will not return until the next Sunday.

During my time in Santa Catarina, I attended three different Catholic masses that proceeded in this fashion. The process is not a very rich, nor a very interesting one. Why, then, is Catholicism so important to the town of Santa Catarina Palopó, and how has it come to shape the behavior of the town every other day of the week? Underlying the surface appearance of disinterest, boredom, and singularly Sunday commitment, I argue that a much richer dynamic is at work- one that attends to the psychological livelihood of the congregation on a much more day-to-day basis. According to research done by Emily Lewis

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9An informal estimation is that the population practicing is about half of this. However, this study only examines the population actually attending Catholic masses.
Hatchwell and Simon Calder, the trend for singular "Sunday" commitment should not come as a surprise. The Catholic Church in Guatemala has long had a policy of leniency—one that was additionally initially intended to make conversion an easier process among the indigenous. Additionally, the use of alcohol (an important Maya costumbre) has been integrated deeply into the Church over the years as Catholicism was adapted to fit old traditions. According to studies by Robert Carlsen, the Church has continued this policy especially in the face of Evangelical competition for conversion (Carlsen 2011). There exists little other research, however on the current discourse regarding current alcohol use within the Catholic Church in highland Guatemala. My findings—which are the result of participant observation, the studying of mensaje in mass, and numerous interviews—resonate with that of Hatchwell and Calder, but with another understanding as to what is this Catholic policy of “leniency,” and how it actually adds to the psychological well-being of the Catholic population, and may in fact make it a more rewarding experience. Truthfully, many Catholics in Santa Catarina Palopó do indulge in alcohol, but for the most part only in moderation. In this analysis, I examine why and how the Catholic Church continues to be an answer for the issue of alcohol abuse, and how it encourages moderation.

Catholic dialogue works with an inherent understanding that we are, all of us, pecadores. We have sinned, and we will continue to sin. This does not, however, give leeway for Church members to sin freely and without regret. Within the Catholic Church, there are many factors at play that contribute to a low or controlled level of alcohol consumption among the Church-attending population. For many people in the Catholic Church, the simple word of God is enough reason to abstain from liquor. The reason is universal in Catholicism: there exists the obligation to follow strict moral code written into the Palabra de Dios in order to receive the promise for eternal life that follows it. Further, however, are two other factors are at play within the Catholic Church to discourage alcohol abuse, and they are not as entirely internal; the Catholic emphasis on forgiveness functions as an outlet for stress relief that alcohol might otherwise substitute for, while a system of informal social policing limits behavior in excess.

*Modes of Escape: Eternal Life as a Long-Term Solution*
True, there is a drawback from the Church’s policy of leniency, especially for those who are recovering from addiction: it demands a greater self-control among individuals to ensure that occasional alcohol use does not drift into excess. If we consider the psychological benefits of alcohol consumption, we can see how the Catholic Church attempts to exceed them. For those living in poverty, as most are in Santa Catarina Palopó, alcohol is an inexpensive, short term escape from daily anxieties. For alcoholics who may succumb to fifteen or thirty day binges, alcohol may serve as a more long-term solution, though it is bound to result in serious issues. The Catholic Church is not ignorant to the poverty in which its congregation is living, and it is not ignorant to the fact that alcohol serves for many people in Santa Catarina as a psychological coping mechanism while living in intense poverty. The Church seems to address this dilemma through an emphasis on eternal life. Where alcohol is only a short-term escape from suffering, the Catholic sermons emphasize greatly the paradise lying beyond, that is only possible through good behavior, and a life handed over to God. This means, according to all of my informants, that one needs to have faith that allows them to see a long-term goal. In her acclaimed memoir, Rigoberta Menchu speaks on the appeal of such a paradise: it gives the escape of hope to a people who might not otherwise have any. It also makes the end of life a physical escape, but again, only one that can be possible through consistent faith in the Church, shown by following the Palabra de Dios, and thus abstaining from liquor.

**Importance of Confession**

There is a heavy emphasis in the Catholic Church on the importance of confession. The obligation to confess comes from the understanding that “Todos somos pecadores.” As one of my informants described, to be a part of the Catholic Church is to understand yourself as a sinner. It is something accepted; it cannot be changed, but it is something that is forgiven. This attitude understandably relieves a considerable amount of pressure in one’s day to day life, and it makes the hope of eternal life as described above more attainable despite small transgressions. This is not to say that sins are overlooked, or that forgiveness is immediate: confession is required for all transgressions, and any transgression in excess is reason to seek greater personal change. It is for this that only two thirds of the congregation generally
accepts communion: those who do not have a "clean conscience," who have not confessed their sins, are prohibited from taking the blessing of communion.

Role of Social Policing

While the means of enforcing the "clean conscience" requisite is technically by an honor system, it is also enforced socially. As it was told to me by a Church worker, the seven members of the church directiva are charged with monitoring the honor system. Informally, however, the system is better enforced by social pressure. Santa Catarina is a small community: houses overlook one another and gossip serves as a most popular past time. To take communion after drinking heavily, or after some similar transgression, would be to assume a false sense of privacy, embarrassingly so in front of a large sector of the community. This is a social pressure, however, that really only applies in situations of excessive transgression, as even religiously sanctioned events like baptisms are understood to include a drink or two. Ultimately, despite the lenient nature of confession, the informal system of social pressure forces a social responsibility to the moral doctrine laid out in the Church, in addition to the internal pledge already made to God.

Conclusions

Under a veneer of disinterest and boredom, a rich dynamic is at work in the Catholic Church guiding the congregation on a more everyday basis. The Catholic emphasis on the afterlife and the paradise therein offers an opportunity for long-term escape from suffering, and this escape is possible through the abstinence from the short-term escape of alcohol. While the possibility for confession makes the paradise of the afterlife more attainable, another side of it means that alcohol use still occurs within the Church. For this, the Catholic Church is unlikely to serve as a standalone rehabilitation for anyone: as in any case, one must first make the choice to seek sobriety. This choice must be a firm one, because the Catholic Church may in fact, as Hatchwell and Calder point out, is relatively lenient on alcohol consumption. To cut alcohol away from one’s life is first and foremost a choice, and it is one that does not occur only on Sundays. It is a given that no “drunk” is attending any Church at all; rather, the Catholic faith and participation promotes a psychological well-being for those who have chosen to seek more healthy outlets to relieve the stress
caused by extreme poverty. While most Catholics have been rooted in the Church through baptism since infancy and have thus grown up in an environment offering stress relief, the optimism of faith, and a pressure for sobriety; for members who have strayed from the *Palabra de Dios*, or for those who have grown up without religion, the doors of the Church are simply open with the offering of a clean slate on the path to finding hope in God.

*The Evangelical Church and Alcohol*

*Church Participation*

The *Asamblea de Dios* looms high over the town of Santa Catarina, perched upon the cliffside that runs down into the neighborhoods. It is Thursday evening, and the *culto* is about to begin. Thirty five town residents, most having hiked the twenty minute uphill trek to be where they are now, have filed into the Church, seated in rows of lawn chairs. The men and women are divided: women sit together on the left side of the room, men on the right, and all are ready to receive God into their hearts this evening. The stage in the front of the yellow-painted Church is sparsely decorated: there is no altar, but there is a band. A keyboardist, two guitarists, two drummers, and a young woman all poised to perform. Without further adieu, the music begins, and so does the clapping, praying, and spiritual trance that accompanies it. Women, who make up a notable majority of the demographic present this evening, may break into sobbing, asking for “*ayuda, ayuda…*,” falling into the support of plastic chair beneath them to pray. As the music dwindles, praying continues (loudly). Finally, a silence slips over the audience, and it comes from a confident presence at the front of the room. Pastor Mariano, dressed in a suit and a smile anyone would feel welcomed by, has taken to the stage, ready to deliver the evening’s *mensaje*. The topic, of course, is God, and the responsibility we each have to him.

Where the Catholic Church encourages sobriety in its congregation, the Evangelical Churches of Santa Catarina Palopó demand it. And in fact, they receive it. Abstinence from alcohol will be an important implication in this evening’s *mensaje*, as it always is. To abstain from beverage is a main moral and behavioral tenet emphasized by Evangelical doctrine, and it is an important one considering the trend for
alcohol abuse among the Maya Indians. Many, if not most, of the members of the congregation this evening have had their lives touched by alcohol. There is no statistic as to how many, but there are countless stories. Blanca, my neighbor standing next to me in the little church, suffered for years at the hands of an alcoholic husband, and her faith eventually empowered her enough to leave him. My host grandmother, Erma, had once watched her husband stumble through alcoholism, eventually selling the family plot to pay for his hobby, and then she watched him die of it. They have gathered here tonight to cope with these scars, and the warm, encouraging, and confident words of Mariano tonight are their light. And little do they know, but Mariano too, has faced the damage of alcohol, a recovering alcoholic himself: reformed by a faith in a higher power that demanded him to abide by a different moral code.

The explosive growth of Evangelism in Central America has long been a topic of interest in anthropology. According to existing literature, alcoholism is one of the main reasons for conversion to Evangelism among Maya populations (Golden and Metz 1991: 328). The majority of these Mayan converts are also very poor, as are most indigenous in Mesoamerica. There are six Evangelical churches in Santa Catarina Palopó, all of which have very strict disciplinary procedures regarding the use of alcohol. For recovering alcoholics on Lake Atitlán, perhaps even graduated patients of Tat Loy, the Evangelical Church has proven an important outlet for support and encouragement: socially and psychologically. My findings bolster those of existing studies, in that the Evangelical Church is generally effective in encouraging sobriety among members of its congregation. Even recovering alcoholics who have reached sobriety years before joining the church claim that their lives did not change significantly until they formally joined the church (Gooren 2002: 328). The question is how?

Regarding the nature and importance of faith in the context of sobriety, Evangelical and Catholic doctrines are understandably similar. Like the Catholic Church, the Evangelical Church uses the *Palabra de Dios* to set moral and behavioral guidelines for its members. Similarly, it is a choice that is made to attend church, and the faith that arises from dedicated participation is a tool of reassurance that encourages the impoverished indigenous to maintain a positive outlook. However, a very different dynamic than that of

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the Catholic Church is functioning in the walls of the Evangelical Church. The emphasis on forgiveness, and the assurance of the paradise that exists in the afterlife, are both very specific only to Catholic discourse. But unlike the Catholic Church, there are much stricter disciplinary procedures enforcing these rules in the walls of the Evangelical Church. In addition to the atmosphere of total sobriety, many factors are at play within the Evangelical mindset that contribute to its effectiveness in eliminating alcohol use, some that even fulfill other functions achieved by alcohol consumption. The Evangelical Church’s emphasis on community and self-determination further contribute to what previous anthropologists claim to be the Alcoholics Anonymous of Maya Indians. In my research, I found that in addition to a strict disciplinary procedure, these two factors contribute most heavily to the success of the Evangelical doctrine in warding off alcohol use among church members.

Drunk on Religion: Psychological Benefits of Church Participation

It is clear that the Evangelical Church invests more on its soundsystem than anything else. The woman standing in front of me had begun sobbing. It was fifteen minutes (though it already felt like an hour) into the main song of prayer at Thursday night culto of the Asamblea de Dios. The clapping, though it had started slowly with the band, had only grown more enthusiastic until it was the only conscious action the women in front of and beside me could commit anymore behind their closed eyes. A young man on the opposite side of the room has begun yelling: a common cry of “Ayudame!” Another woman next to me had turned to the wall, to whom she was releasing her shouts and sobs that rocked out with the movement of her body. Is this what it means to be drunk with religion?

The Evangelical Church’s success in achieving sobriety in its congregation may be due to the fact that it achieves a similar function that alcohol would otherwise among the congregation. To lose oneself in prayer in this way is to become lost in God himself, similar to the escape one might seek through intoxication through beverage. This trancelike state comes from a combination of ecstatic faith, and the baptism in the “holy spirit” which is necessary to facilitate such communication with the higher power that is Dios. (It is a phenomenon that the significantly smaller Charismatic Catholic presence has picked up on Lewis 16
as well, and it is the primary benefit received by Catholics who attend the charismatic *cultos* that take place after normal masses.)

This phenomenon that occurs in the first thirty minutes of *culto* gives the first headway to the theory that religious participation fulfills many of the functions served by alcohol consumption. The theory holds water further as it is carried into church structure and discourse, contributing to the successfulness of Evangelical prohibition. However, it is not the function of the Evangelical Church to simply refill the sensual void felt through abstinence from alcohol among those members of the church who may have previously sought alcohol as a valuable means of escape. Other functions include providing sources of positive existential outlook, as well as pillars of community.

*Support and Reassurance: Community and Self-Determination within the Evangelical Church*

For our purposes, the Evangelical Church serves as two forms of community: a social community, and a supportive, sober community for those who have felt the backlash of alcohol abuse. As a social community, the Evangelical Church itself provides outlets of socialization. Two large parties took place during my time in Santa Catarina Palopó, both held prominently and loudly within the main square. For risk groups within the church, these gatherings offer a sober social alternative for social drinking. There are also several youth groups, bringing together the youth of the church for activities, especially on Friday and Saturday nights when social drinking is most likely to take place. The other community dynamic is more for women, who are unlikely to drink regardless. For women, *culto* and the various women’s groups (whose discussions often regard the pain experienced by alcohol abuse), the community is one to empower and support.

Juxtaposed with the idea of the community is an important discourse regarding the importance and empowerment of the *individual* within the church. The emphasis on the individual entails an important idea of self-determination in the face of poverty. One difference between the Catholic and Evangelical churches is that of who attends, and with whom, and it is a difference that highlights another important dynamic is taking place in the Evangelical Church: the role of the individual. Unlike the Catholic Church where
families attend as groups as outings of tradition, those in attendance at the Evangelical Church usually come by themselves. This belies an important facet of Evangelical participation, something that was often emphasized in sermons, too: individual responsibility and empowerment. In each of the four cultos I attended at the Asamblea, the idea of self-determination was continually raised, and it seems to be an important factor influencing the congregation’s outlook on alcohol use. Henri Gooren describes the same trend during his fieldwork in Guatemala in sermons, and how this highlights a capacity for moral change on an individual basis. This need for change (or the need for moral reinforcement in the case of the many women who use church as a coping mechanism for suffering brought on by alcoholic family members) is often only felt by individuals, and the Evangelical Church preaches that the individual is in fact the level at which moral change takes place. Mariano once gave a mensjae regarding the individual responsibility to pray, for example. To pray is an obligation, but one that no one else can force. This prayer is also a form of empowerment. To pray is to be proactive, as one Evangelical woman, Carolina, described to me. When her husband’s alcoholism became too great a burden to bear, she left him: what followed were the worst years of her life. She was without money, house, or food for her children; she believes she should have died.

With no financial or social resources to speak of, and a woman, Carolina turned to the only place she could: the Evangelical church next door. While the incidents that eventually led to her economic and self-improvement are probably due to a variety of factors, Carolina believes it was her dedication to prayer, and her ability to, that improved her prospects so significantly. For many people like Carolina, Evangelism is an outlet for individual proactivity and empowerment, especially for those who may have no other option. It is an outlet of relief for the floating anxiety of poverty experienced by so many members of the community, without which many people have turned to alcohol.

**Evangelical Disciplinary Policy**

To drink as a member of the Evangelical Church means to resign oneself to one to three months of metaphoric exile. The Asamblea de Dios has a similar policy to that of the Catholic Church, in that a member who has confessed to drinking, or some similar sin (the second most problematic is fornication)
must refrain from accepting the monthly blessing of the Eucharist, for some period of time determined by the pastor. Similar to that of the Catholic Church, this policy plays out under an honor system, overlooked by informal social policing. This strict policy is why Tadeo, owner of Tat Loy, encourages his graduated patients to seek out participation in the Evangelical Church. For many recovering alcoholics, such as Tadeo himself who is an Evangelical, the additional social pressure to abstain from even one drink is helpful. Tadeo, for example, described the temptation he could not resist after tasting the ever-slight dose of alcohol contained in cough syrup. During an earlier period of his path to recovery, he once downed an entire bottle. For this, he claimed, the Evangelical prohibition tactic is helpful to recovering alcoholics who need more support in order to fight temptation. Considering that most of the men in the church are young and single—the demographic most likely to fall into alcohol abuse in Santa Catarina Palopó—this policy may also serve as a prevention technique, the safeguard assurance of a choice made to abstain from alcohol consumption. For people like my neighbor Blanca, this policy serves to remind her that she can be part of a community truly free of the influence of alcohol. Still, for many members of the congregation, this policy is unnecessary.

And actually, for some other members of the community, the disciplinary procedure is actually a deterrent from joining the Evangelical Church, and perhaps from hearing its valuable discourse on the dangers of alcohol. This was true for the father of my host family, a recently married man in his late twenties. As he described it to me, “Dios está en mi corazon, pero no puedo ir a la iglesia…” The Evangelical Church’s strict prohibition on even social drinking greatly restricts the population it can reach. It is in large part due to the church’s strictness that only 10% of the Santa Catarina Palopó population identifies as Evangelical and is not growing quickly, according to both the pastor and to my numerous Catholic and Evangelical informants. This is an interesting finding in light of that of most other literature, which claims the Evangelical Church is growing much more rapidly.

Conclusions

While the Evangelical Church offers powerful outlets for coping with stress and anxiety, and offers
hope and faith for seeing a greater picture in the light of suffering, its attempt to fully remove alcohol from the lives of the congregation is a step that some are unwilling and unready to take. For those who are ready, the Evangelical Church is a system of psychological support, community support, and individual empowerment for many people whose lives have fallen victim to the damaging grip of alcohol. As a part of the Evangelical Church, alcohol takes away from one’s ability to worship properly, and the argument is, in fact, that if one is filled with God the use of alcohol simply shouldn’t be necessary as a coping mechanism or otherwise. It is a finding of my research, and the general consensus of scholars who have studied the matter, that the Evangelical Church has had more success than the Catholic Church in the reduction of alcohol use in its congregation. While the exact psychological processes behind this are ambiguous, we might attribute this trend to several factors: the stronger sense of community provided by church social groups, the emphasis on the individual’s capacity for reform, and a more interactive church experience, facilitating through music a spiritual trance. Its success is also likely due to the Evangelical’s stricter attitude regarding alcohol, and it is a source of empowerment for those who have pledged alcohol out of their lives.

**Spirituality as a Factor in Clinical Treatment**

"Dios me consejas serenidad para aceptar las cosa que no puedo cambiar. Valor para cambiar las cosas que yo pueda, y sabiduría para saber la diferencia."10

Juan sits on a street corner in front of his family’s modest tienda, sipping on an energy drink. His nine year old son, Alex, sits with him as Juan tries to explain to me why these two lines of prayer have had such a profound impact on his future. Juan is a recovering alcoholic. He hasn’t had a drink in about a year now, but he remembers a time when his life was a shaped by this addiction. Juan is a former patient of Tat Loy, and during his several stints there, this small prayer would begin every morning’s mensaje. These mensajes are facilitated by the doctrine of Alcoholics Anonymous, which is a major component of the

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10 “God, give me serenity to accept the things I cannot change. Courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.”

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rehabilitation program. Juan himself does not identify with any religion, but he claims that his relationship
with a higher power was one of the most important factors in overcoming the addiction that he refers to as
his “enfermedad.”

Juan continues to attend Alcoholics Anonymous twice per week, traveling twenty minutes from San
Antonio Palopò to the closest group, located in San Lucas Tolimàn. Despite the time and effort, Juan
considers his dedication to the group one of the most important influences on his sobriety today. For Juan,
group participation is an important source of support, community, reflection, and it obliges a level of
responsibility on his part to himself, to other group members, and importantly, to God. To Juan, this
exchange also means that God has a responsibility to him. When Juan’s addiction became unmanageable
and he resigned himself to treatment through Alcoholics Anonymous, the first step required of him was to
come to believe in a power greater to himself, and to therein make the decision to turn his life and will over
to the care of God, “however He may be understood to exist.” This mantra is a large component of the
Alcoholics Anonymous Twelve Step Program11 (also followed in Tat Loy), and it is one that continues to
help Juan to feel a sense of control in his life over those events he cannot control. For Juan, it helps him to
cope with a past that he has no power to change. His biggest regret has to do with his ten year addiction to
alcohol during which he was not seeking treatment: Juan physically abused his eldest daughter, who is now
eighteen. The pain of memory is something that Juan has to cope with every day, but it is with the prayer
above that he is able to cope, knowing that a higher power is granting him strength and relief to overcome a
struggle that he himself does not believe he has the capacity to.

In Juan’s testimony comes forward a mode of treatment essential to Alcoholics Anonymous:
spirituality. If we are to consider the Catholic and Evangelical tendencies to use spirituality as a way to
combat the use of alcohol, and to enrich the lives of members by functioning as an important outlet of
stress relief that alcohol might otherwise serve, Tat Loy and the broader program of Alcoholics
Anonymous too fall into a category of “spiritual rehabilitation”—a category of which they are the most

11 See Appendix III
aggressive options. Apart from the more comprehensive and aggressive treatment offered at Tat Loy, Alcoholics Anonymous is the only formal rehabilitation program in the department of Sololá, and it is a program rooted deeply in spiritual understanding. For most inhabitants of Santa Catarina, unfortunately, the monthly rate at Tat Loy of 1000Q is too steep, and the closest Alcoholics Anonymous group is still too far. However, the string of similarities between the religious discourses of Santa Catarina and the techniques of rehabilitation used by Alcoholics and Tat Loy may mean that comparable treatment is available. The primary techniques of rehabilitation used by Tat Loy and Alcoholics Anonymous--faith in a higher power, routine, the construction of a community that embraces sobriety, all building to psychological support, stability, and relief--are all experiences provided similarly by Catholic and Evangelical participation. This does not mean, however, that these burgeoning Christian traditions will end the epidemic of alcoholism among the Maya: the path to sobriety begins with the choice to seek it.

To understand the use of a higher power in the discourse of Alcoholics Anonymous is to understand the importance of faith in the face of hardship. It is the same faith that Carolina had as she prayed for her suffering to end when she could do no more than pray, and it is the same faith that allows Juan to know that a higher power will carry him as he continues his fight for sobriety “day by day.” Upon their discharge from Tat Loy, patients will be strongly encouraged to seek participation in either the Catholic or Evangelical church. Those who do not, according to Tadeo, a recovering alcoholic and reformed Evangelical himself, are much more likely to find themselves again before the podium at Tat Loy, explaining their stories to a new room of people. Most graduated patients will seek the embrace of the Evangelical Church, due to its stricter approach to prohibition (although those raised in the Catholic Church are more likely to return there, due to years of experience that have rooted them there.) Still, church participation, and the adoption of a new moral doctrine, is not a cure all to alcohol dependence. While disciplinary procedures may be important, and are certainly emphasized within the two churches, the experience of Alcoholics Anonymous tells us something more important about the nature of addiction, its relation to poverty, and about the role faith has played in addressing the issue of alcoholism in Santa
Catarina. We have seen the ways in which Catholic and Evangelical discourses are influencing the psyche of their respective congregations, and though there are differences, a cornerstone of each is a faith that a higher power will end the suffering of a people for whom poverty runs a tradition as thick as blood. It is a faith that provides the hope of brighter horizons, relieving levels of anxiety often lulled to sleep otherwise by a nightly *cerveza*. Fifty five years after the revival of Catholic and Christian sentiments in Santa Catarina Palopó, “*los borrachos*” are still the sleeping fixtures in doorways and sidewalks that they were before, and the *cantinas* continue to open their doors for them each evening. But at about the same time, the trill of church bells begins its lull over the mountain, louder and louder.
Appendix I

This table assesses and compares the various social, psychological, and spiritual benefits achieved through the three traditions of “spiritual rehabilitation” discussed within this study, and compares them back to the same categories of benefits achieved through alcohol consumption.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Alcohol Consumption</th>
<th>Catholic Church Participation</th>
<th>Evangelical Church Participation</th>
<th>Alcoholics Anonymous</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Psychological</td>
<td>Short-term relief of anxiety; exit from reality</td>
<td>Long-term prospects for the relief of anxiety and suffering (discourse on eternal life)</td>
<td>Long and short term prospects for the relief of anxiety and suffering, due to emphasis on eternal life, as well as the power and willingness of God to address the problems of those who pray</td>
<td>Short and long term relief of anxiety, due to ability to “turn control over” to a higher power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Social networking, diversion</td>
<td>Social pressure to abide by moral code; little social networking</td>
<td>Some social pressure to abide by moral laws; rich social networking</td>
<td>Strong support of a community with a shared goal; rich social exchange and sharing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual</td>
<td>Induces trancelike state</td>
<td>Long-term faith, Charismatic Catholics enter spiritual trance through music</td>
<td>Long-term faith, ability to enter spiritual trance through music</td>
<td>Long-term faith in a higher power, gives life meaning and direction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presiding Sacred Text</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Bible</td>
<td>Bible</td>
<td>Alcoholics Anonymous Twelve Step Program</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix II

Drunkenness is an important part of Maya religious and spiritual tradition.

Alcohol was a part of Mayan culture since long before the arrival of the Spanish into Mesoamerica. In Mayan religion, alcohol was used in ceremony to reach an inebriation that facilitated the attainment of a religious spirit conducive to worship (Garrard-Burnett 2000: 348). This usage was confirmed to me by the last surviving ak’ij in Santa Catarina Palopó, who still uses alcohol as a ceremonial component, if only for the tourists whose interests in participating in such ceremonies keeps the tradition alive. A more recent spiritual tradition in Santa Catarina Palopó is that of the cofradía, an institution put into place by the Spanish during the colonial period, as a complement to the Catholic Church. A cofradía, meaning cofraternity, is an organization of people charged with caring for the image of a Catholic saint. Members organize, take on different jobs in the Church and municipality, gaining status in both the Church and city yearly. The cofrades, or members, were also charged with purchasing the expensive costumbre necessary for the public ferias, a grand portion of which was alcohol.

In light of a changing religious climate, the cofradías of Santa Catarina Palopó have changed in Lewis 24
nature dramatically. There are technically two: that of Santa Catalina, the town’s patron saint, and that of Santa María. The cofradias have been consolidated, and are, for all intents and purposes, inactive. However, Anthropologist Ruth Bunzel paints a vivid picture of what one of these ferías may have looked like in Santa Catarina eighty years ago, spotlighting the intense drunkenness that accompanied the festivities: “Both men and women drink a great deal, and become very drunk… The drink not only accompanies the fiesta but is a part of it… For the drinking in the cofradía is an act of worship, like dancing or singing in other places. The gods want to see people happy, the joy of drink is, therefore, pleasing to them” (Bunzel 1952: 256-257). To confirm that Bunzel’s findings held water and were relevant in Santa Catarina Palopó, I interviewed several former cofrades. The feria of Santa Catalina took place every year on November 25, though in agreeance with Bunzel’s observations, the festivities themselves lasted up to a week or more, and during this time a drunken haze would settle in over the town. With food, plenty of liquor, and good company, the feria really functioned as an extended fiesta, but with religious connotations. Not only was it encouraged for townspeople to drink to achieve a sense of proper spirit, but my informants assured me that it was obligatory for both cofrades and alcaldes. Drunkenness, as Bunzel noted, was pleasing to the saints.

The question, then, is how did alcohol emerge as such a mainstay of costumbre, if the cofradía was, after all, an institution put in place by the Catholic Church? I found the answer to resonate with Robert Carlsen’s findings in the nearby Santiago Atitlan, where two factors were at play. The first is that the Catholic Church established itself, and the relatively self-governing system of cofradía (which was well-received and adopted on a large scale among the indigenous), in the Lake Atitlán area in the 1520’s, but after two centuries the Spanish Catholic presence in Santiago Atitlán fell into a period of dormancy, during which the cofradias were not supervised by the entity of Catholic Action that now monitors the Catholic population today (that resembles more closely the original Catholicism instituted by the Spanish, rather than what Robert Carlsen deems folk-Catholicism, which floated otherwise to the forefront of Catholic culture). The cofradias thus became subject to the second factor that explains their favor of alcohol as costumbre: the Mayan tendency to fuse old and traditional religious ideology onto the new. One informant explained to me that the Catholic Church had been relatively dormant as an institution in Santa Catarina, as in Santiago Atitlán, until about 55 years ago when a priest was installed into the formerly vacant Church. My informant, a Catholic catechist, explained to me that during the absence of an official Catholic presence on the lake, the cofradias had morally and religiously “strayed,” thus explaining the prevalence of alcohol, and drunkenness in a supposedly Catholic institution.

When the Catholic revival took place, about fifty five years ago, the cofradias of Santa Catarina changed significantly. The change, and reduction of both costumbre and participation within the cofradía was amplified with the introduction of Evangelism to the area about twenty years later. The churches, which converted residents, even cofrades, on a grand scale, saw the drunkenness taking place within the cofradias as symptomatic of a greater moral spoilage, only naturally, as abstinence from alcohol is in the Palabra de Dios. One informant described to me the pain her father felt as a result of this contention. During the time, he was serving as alcalde, but was conflicted about his obligation to participate in the feria, also being a newly converted Evangelical. In the end, he decided it was his responsibility to his community, and to those who had elected him, to participate in the feria, and therefore to drink.

This rift between tradition and new religion was one that would grow and grow, and one that came at the cost of the cofradía. As more and more people left the cofradía to dedicate their lives to stricter Catholicism and to Evangelism, the costs of the cofradía became too expensive for the small group to
maintain. Not only was the Catholic revival urging the _cofradia_ to end its emphasis on alcohol, but the _costumbre_ was one that was now too expensive to keep up. Of the three of the former _cofrades_ I spoke with, one has since converted to Evangelism, and two have since dedicated their lives to a stricter Catholicism. All looked back on their time in the _cofradías_ with a certain fondness, though also with a sense of disdain for their behavior within the institution, primarily their former tendency for drunkenness. Without being prompted, two of my informants told me they had become alcoholics during their time in the _cofradia_, and it was in the _cofradia_ that they learned to drink heavily. While these realizations may have been colored by my informants’ current religious and moral affiliations, they also give light to the very real tendency to abuse alcohol in Santa Catarina, no doubt related to the gravity of the poverty experienced on at least some level by every member of the community. The Evangelical and Catholic policies of prohibition no doubt contributed to their success in the community of Santa Catarina, and today, both churches actively speak against the use of alcohol in their respective _mensajes_.

Today, the _cofradías_ of Santa Catarina Palopó are not the social or spiritual hubs that they once were: presently, there are only four remaining _cofrades_ between the two _cofradías_, both of which have been, for all intents and purposes, inactive for the last twenty years. The saints sit dormant upon a relatively scant altar, in a house that was constructed to house the two of them jointly, as no one can longer afford or wishes to accept the saints into their homes. The house of the two saints is hidden away in the thick of a residential neighborhood just away from the main street. Signs point to the _cofradia_ from the _Calle Principal_, directing tourists to the vacant orange house, which is often referred to as “el museo.” The _feria_, once a communal tradition so richly described by Bunzel, is now limited each year to only the afternoon procession of the saints through the streets: a traditional Catholic mass follows in the church. Further celebrations take place only in private homes, and if alcohol is in fact involved in these private festivities, it is something better not advertised.

Appendix III

The 12 Step Program of Alcoholics Anonymous is heavily based in faith, and the acceptance of a higher power. A list of all twelve steps is laid out on a poster in the main group room of Tat Loy.

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.
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.

A main topic of discourse in the AA chats I witnessed was how best to integrate the ideology listed above into daily life.
Barry, Herbert.

Bunzel, Ruth.

Carlsen, Robert S.

Garrard-Burnett, Virginia.

Goldin, Liliana, and Brent Metz.

Gooren, Henri.

Hatchwell, Emily, and Simon Calder.

Kanteres, Fotis, Dirk Lachenmeier, and Jürgen Rehm.