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The History of Secular Organizations for Sobriety—Save Our Selves: An Interview with James Christopher

Introduction

For more than a quarter of a century, James Christopher, founder of Secular Organizations for Sobriety (SOS), has advanced the idea that there are multiple pathways to addiction recovery and that these pathways include secular, rational approaches to the resolution of alcohol and other drug problems. As described on its websites (www.sossobriety.org and www.cfiwest.org/sos):

SOS is an alternative recovery method for those alcoholics or drug addicts who are uncomfortable with the spiritual content of widely available 12-Step programs. SOS takes a reasonable, secular approach to recovery and maintains that sobriety is a separate issue from religion or spirituality. SOS credits the individual for achieving and maintaining his or her own sobriety, without reliance on any "Higher Power." SOS respects recovery in any form regardless of the path by which it is achieved. It is not opposed to or in competition with any other recovery programs.

SOS supports healthy skepticism and encourages the use of the scientific method to understand alcoholism.

SOS is a non-profit network of autonomous, non-professional local groups dedicated solely to helping individuals achieve and maintain sobriety.

Jim was among the early advocates calling for alternatives to Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12-Step groups as well as alternatives to 12-Step oriented addiction treatment. His position was quite clear: people seeking recovery should have choices between religious, spiritual, and secular frameworks of recovery support, and no one should be mandated into a particular framework of recovery.

I have corresponded with Jim for many years and first interviewed him in 2007. In 2012, I had the opportunity to interview Jim again, and in this interview, Jim describes the beginnings of SOS and what distinguishes SOS as a framework for long-term addiction recovery. Join us on this journey through the history of SOS.

Bill White: Jim, describe the circumstances that led to the founding of Secular Organization for Sobriety (SOS).

James Christopher: Well, after several false starts, I got sober on a continuing basis beginning April 24, 1978. After a few days, I went to AA because that's where one went in those days, but

after a while, I began to back away from it. I thought the people in AA were very helpful, but this particular approach was just not my cup of tea. Sobriety was my cup of tea, and I was sure you could achieve that without the spiritual and religious trappings of AA. I was sure you could get sober and stay sober without waiting for a spiritual experience. In fact, I became more and more convinced that sobriety was something that could be deliberately induced through a process that I call cognitive/visceral synchronization. That is how I've stayed sober to the present.

I'd had what I call "novelty sobriety" once before that for seven months, i.e., things are a little better, but you don't have any plan or real commitment. That came before the epiphany. Prior to the epiphany, I had suffered for more than 15 years, including an almost successful attempted suicide when I was about 30. Even that didn't stop me from drinking.

A therapist I was working with said she would not work with me if I kept on drinking and did not try AA. I didn't care for AA particularly, so after about seven months, I relapsed for a period of several years. That brings me back to age 35 on April 24, 1978. That was when I had what I think of as my "epiphany"—a strong, out-of-the-blue spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and visceral experience all fused together. It was sort of a flash neon reality of, "What is this? This isn't a life. This is a horror." I later came to think of this experience as "cognitive, visceral synchronization." It was this mind-gut fusion where you actually see the connection between the euphoria of drinking and its later consequences. Some might call it a "spiritual experience." Some might call it an emotional breakthrough. But more than anything, it is this deep realization that alcohol equals pain. I mean pain! My troubles are from drinking alcohol!

It doesn't make any difference how you come to this sobriety priority commitment. As long as people find a way to commit themselves to abstinence, they are welcome in SOS. And so it was this epiphany—this cognitive, visceral fusion, this deep realization that alcohol equals pain that led to my long-term sobriety. The straightforward way to get sober is to speak to your primitive addictive self in its own language: Alcohol equals pain.

A while after I was sober, I began to miss the camaraderie of other folks in recovery, so occasionally I would go back to an AA meeting, but they were just not for me. In 1984, I wrote an article for *Free Inquiry*, an international humanist magazine, entitled "Sobriety without Superstition" that was later published in 1985. I also began giving talks on a secular approach to alcoholism recovery at various humanist meetings. A lady who attended one of these talks said that someone really ought to start an alternative to AA. That's not what I had planned. I was happy and exuberantly sober; I wasn't carrying placards down the streets or anything, but things began to develop in 1985 and 1986. We had been having some private meetings at homes, but I started one held at the Parks and Recreation Department in North Hollywood, California. During this same time, I was getting lots of responses from people worldwide who'd read my articles and shared my response to AA meetings. Now this was clearly a kitchen table operation at this point, but I developed some materials with the help of other early SOS members. These materials included my six guidelines for sobriety that can be found today in our SOS guidebook for group leaders.

**SOS Suggested Guidelines for Sobriety
(Read at the opening of SOS meetings)**

- To break the cycle of denial and achieve sobriety, we first acknowledge that we are alcoholics or addicts.

- We affirm this truth daily and accept without reservation—one day at a time—that as clean and sober individuals, we cannot and do not drink or use, no matter what.
- Since drinking or using is not an option for us, we take whatever steps are necessary to continue our Sobriety Priority lifelong.
- A quality of life, “the good life,” can be achieved. However, life is also filled with uncertainties. Therefore, we do not drink or use regardless of feelings, circumstances, or conflicts.
- We share in confidence with each other our thoughts and feelings as sober, clean individuals.
- Sobriety is our priority, and we are each responsible for our lives and our sobriety.

First published in James Christopher’s *How to Stay Sober: Recovery without Religion* and later in the *SOS Guidebook for Group Leaders*.

Bill White: What are the most important qualities you brought to the founding of SOS?

James Christopher: I’d have to say my personal sobriety. I’m a certified addiction specialist, but far more importantly, I am a Sober Alcoholic. I don’t want to get nauseating about it, but I am an exuberant sobriest. That’s been the joy of my life, along with helping create this alternative approach to recovery. I think what I added to this history is championing the individual through the SOS approach. We’re not into a “groupthink” per se; we’re into championing individual sobriety.

Bill White: Many people know of SOS from the books you wrote. How did these come about?

James Christopher: The books were a way to elaborate responses to all the questions that were coming into SOS from the public and the press. My first three books, *How to Stay Sober: Recover Without Religion* (1988), *Unhooked: Staying Sober and Drug Free* (1989), and *SOS Sobriety* (1992), were all published through Prometheus Books. These books further elaborated the SOS approach to recovery. My fourth book, *Escape from Nicotine Country: How to Stop Smoking Painlessly* (1999), was my response to the hideous cigarette addiction problem. We’ve added other literature as well, tweaking our brochures over time and two books by our members, Liz Purcell’s *Seeds of Sobriety: Practical Daily Readings for Alcoholics and Addicts* (2006) and Duaine Metevia’s *Building Recovery* (2008). The former is a daily meditational with secular sayings, and the latter is a guide on how to start and conduct SOS meetings. There is also Larry Hochhaus’ book *Aphorisms for Addicts* (2008). We have a lot of talent and a lot of sobriety that’s developed in SOS over the years. We assume folks in SOS prefer anonymity unless they say otherwise. If one says my name is Mary Smith, that’s fine; if they say my name is Mary S., that’s fine also.

Bill White: How have face-to-face meetings grown since your inception?

James Christoher: The growth began shortly after the *Free Inquiry* magazine article. Then we got this tremendous publicity from other corners. Articles about SOS from the *Los Angeles Times* to the *Journal of the American Medical Association* stirred interest in what we were doing. There really was not any geographical pattern to our growth, except maybe in the larger states such as New York and Texas. In New York, court cases ruling that AA was a religious organization and that you could not mandate people to AA also reinforced the importance of choice and created a climate in which our expansion unfolded. Early on, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice invited us to offer an alternative to the 12 Steps for their inmates. California has also been a large group area, especially southern California.

We have also seen growth in Canada and Europe, particularly Western Europe. Perhaps the fastest area of overall growth has been that of our online groups.

Bill White: Where would you place SOS historically in the growing varieties of alternatives to Alcoholics Anonymous?

James Christopher: Well, we're the oldest of the secular alternatives other than Women for Sobriety, and we are the largest in terms of size and availability of meetings. We have maintained good relationships with Women for Sobriety and SMART Recovery, and we've always invited them to our conferences. At SOS, we champion the alternatives and feel the more alternatives the better. We're considered the world's largest alternative to 12-Step programs, and we maintain a growing database of more than 20,000 persons.

There is a distinctive approach within SOS. The SOS way is to encourage the individual to develop his or her own personal approach to recovery utilizing tools and structure that we offer. They can take what they like and leave the rest. I'm sure you've heard that before, but we actually mean it. There is no holy writ or anything carved in stone in our meetings. What works for Fred might not work for Ethel, you know what I mean? We don't have a "large P" program; we have individualized "small p" programs—as many as we have individuals in SOS. This has been confusing to professionals who want to know our version of the 12 Steps, but it makes perfect sense to SOS members. SOS is a friendly alternative to the 12 Steps. It's more of a self-empowerment approach, and we don't care whether you're a Baptist, Methodist, Presbyterian, Jew, Muslim, atheist, agnostic, democrat, or republican. We don't care about any of those things. We care about getting off the sauce and the drugs and staying off and supporting each other in that process.

The SOS Program

Bill White: Jim, one of the core ideas that came out of your epiphany was this notion of sobriety priority, which came to be such a central concept in SOS. Could you elaborate on the meaning of sobriety priority?

Jim Christopher: The sobriety priority means that whatever else happens in your life is a separate issue from the issue of drinking or using drugs. Nothing gets in front of my sobriety. My sobriety is numero uno as a separate issue from everything else. It's very simple for me—my name is Jim, I'm a sober alcoholic, I don't drink or use no matter what. Why? Because I can't drink and use and get away with it and what's more, I don't want to drink or use and get away with it.

I've known some sober bastards who know how to do sobriety; they know how to do sobriety, but they are real jerks. There are some really awful people who are sober, and there are some real sweethearts who are still drunk. The issue of drinking is separate from such qualities of character. I've seen awful people staying sober, and I'm thrilled by witnessing people staying sober with other unresolved issues raging. I think that's a very hopeful, helpful thing.

Having said that, the sobriety priority is a key tenet of SOS, I need to also say even that can be rejected in a free-thought forum. Any SOS member is free to say, "That's a bunch of malarkey, but I consider myself a member of SOS, too." That's fine. The point is that if they're sober, we clearly see that they're doing something right. So, if they don't go along with these core ideas, I want to make it clear, they're still welcome in SOS.

Bill White: Some see recovery tied closely to a larger process of transformation of character, values, and identity, but you are emphasizing that drinking is very separate from any such broader changes. Is that accurate?

Jim Christopher: That is accurate. Issues that contributed to people becoming addicted may be personally important, but they are not important to the decision to stop drinking and using drugs. Debates over whether addiction is a disease or a behavior rage on, but they are not important to the decision to stop the pain in your life. In SOS, we want people to obey the laws of the land, and we hope that you will and use this time now that you're no longer pickled to go back to college or go into therapy or whatever you may do to develop yourself, but we see all such decisions as separate from the more primary decision to not drink no matter what. What you choose to do or not do to develop yourself is separate from the more primitive issue of, "I am dying. This is not helpful. I am addicted to alcohol and I can't drink or use and get away with it." This priority in your life is separate from all else. When I experience bad times, whatever the situation might be, I don't think of a drink. That decision has been permanently made, but I don't assume that my sobriety is on "automatic pilot"; it's up to me to protect it, keeping it fresh, if you will. When I accept that I just can't drink or use, it's a separate issue from everything else in my life.

Bill White: You've expressed a preference for the term "sobriety" over the term "recovery." Could you elaborate on that?

Jim Christopher: I do see sobriety as a separate issue from all else, including recovery. If you're not drinking, I don't care how you've achieved it. If you used to be a drunk and you're not drinking but continue to steal hubcaps, I don't advocate that and I hope people will obey the law, but sobriety is a separate issue from these other decisions in life. Folks move at their own pace, and I guess I would call this opportunity to grow *recovery*. It's nice if people are compassionate and decent in their behavior with their fellow humans, but this is not a requirement for sobriety. Mafia chieftains can stop drinking and continue being mafia chieftains I suppose. I'm not advocating that; I'm just saying it's a separate issue from recovery. I wanted to do whatever was necessary to stay sober, and I would call that recovery. Sobriety, recovery: these are just semantics.

If you attend SOS and say, "I am recovered," bully for you! It's certainly not language I use, but you're certainly welcome to attend this free-thought forum where individuality is respected in the collective. We don't believe that the only way to get sober is through SOS. It

might be in a church, and I've always loved and admired the Uncle Alfies of the world that said, "God damn it, that's the last drink for me" and they throw the bottle of Jack Daniels right into the lake on their fishing trip and that's it. And they're very emotional about it, too, and that's the end of it. Now, I know that some folks don't honor that as recovery. They think that they are dry drunks or some such nonsense, but those people are just as abstinent or sober as anyone else in the sober world, and there was no religious inclination whatsoever.

If somebody gets sober in a church, a synagogue, a mosque, in AA, or in a Bertrand Russell Society [laughter], it's all good and should be honored. They're sober, they've stopped drinking. I may not agree with their methods, but that's their business. Feeling connected to a community of recovering people is important, but I was sober on my own without saying hello to recovering people.

Bill White: What common practices in AA would not be found in SOS?

James Christopher: I will give you a few examples. We don't have sponsorship, which we believe often fosters guru-ism. As a new member, we don't direct you; we walk beside you. If you have three days of sobriety, we don't say "Put cotton in your mouth and open up your ears, sit down and shut up." We say "Participate, participate, participate; we're not going to force you to, but we hope you'll get quickly involved." We don't use bumper sticker lingo, so you would find SOS meetings free from the sloganeering common in other groups. We encourage free expressions of members to each other in the meetings, and we are tolerant of people using any methods that are helping them stay sober. And we are fine with people leaving SOS meetings when they feel they no longer need such support. A lot of people get pretty healthy here so there's nothing wrong with people moving on with their lives as long as they can take the necessary sobriety priority and sobriety tools with them. We have what I call the SOS Sobriety Priority for folks—something right off the rack—but if someone wants to craft their own program, they are free to do that in SOS. But there are also many things SOS and AA share in common—a focus on abstinence, a focus on mutual support, a meeting format, exchanging telephone numbers, and so on.

Bill White: Some people are surprised to find that there are members of SOS who also simultaneously participate in AA.

James Christopher: There are some folks—I call them United Nations folks—who can go to anything and get what they like out of it. They are very, very open to all ideas and can listen to all sides and be reasonably objective. Such folks can go to 12-Step meetings, SOS meetings, Women for Sobriety meetings, and SMART Recovery meetings and on and on and get something out of all of them. But then there are ones in each group, and in my experience particularly from 12-Step groups, who just don't think other groups should exist. Someone shook one of my books in my face once on a TV tour, and I said, "May we exist?" He really felt that we shouldn't. Our motto is, "Hey if you don't like the support, then don't go there." But all groups have a right to exist.

In the early days, almost all SOS members had prior experience in AA, but today people achieve and maintain their sobriety who have never been to an AA meeting.

Bill White: Does SOS have a particular stance on medications as an aid to recovery?

James Christopher: Medication for addiction or a co-occurring psychiatric condition can be helpful depending on the individual. I'm not a person on medication, so would I say, "Ain't I great?" No, I would say, "Ain't I lucky," because I don't imagine things and hear voices in my head. I'm just fortunate that I don't, but am I better than those who need medication support? Of course not!

SOS Organizational Structure

Bill White: Could you describe the organizational structure of SOS?

James Christopher: We take a free thought forum approach, not that it's a free for all. That means that there's the SOS clearinghouse, which doesn't tell you how to live but supplies meeting materials and connects folks with others. Each meeting is autonomous as long as they have three precepts in place: they are secular, they are self-help rather than professionally facilitated meetings, and their primary reasons for existing are to achieve and maintain abstinence and to support each other in that process. If they have that going for them, then they can conduct the meetings as they wish. We don't have a one size fits all format that we impose on all SOS groups. We have a general suggested format, and they can add or take away from that, whatever helps their particular meeting.

Bill White: Is there a governing structure of SOS?

James Christopher: Yes, each meeting governs itself. We don't have any structured hierarchy. We only have the clearinghouse as a support to local meetings and host of our international gatherings. Free anonymous meetings all over the world, each responsible for itself, has worked very well for us.

Bill White: How is the SOS Clearinghouse financially supported?

James Christopher: The SOS Clearinghouse is autonomously administered—that would be yours truly. I'm on a modest salary from the Center for Inquiry Transnational. The Center for Inquiry / Los Angeles houses the SOS Clearinghouse. The Clearinghouse is supported by a mix of donations, income from literature and books, and periodic fund drives. We're always in the red, but we have survived all of these years.

Bill White: So many groups that preceded AA self-destructed, and AA's resilience has been attributed in great part to AA's twelve traditions. Is there a counterpart to the traditions in SOS?

James Christopher: The answer is yes, and what we think of as general principles and guidelines are outlined in our brochures and can be found displayed on our website (See Appendix).

Future of SOS

Bill White: Jim, any final reflections as you look back over this work you have been involved in for so many years now?

James Christopher: I'm just a regular down home guy who's happy to be off the sauce and to have a life that I've enjoyed immensely. I'm looking forward to the day when AA takes its rightful place as one of many recovery pathways. I'm looking forward to a time when more lives will be saved because of these expanded choices. SOS, AA, Women for Sobriety, SMART Recovery, and all the rest: they are all needed because not everyone who needs recovery support is going to be attracted to or stick with AA. Recovery from addiction is hard, and we need all the help we can get. And if one door doesn't work, maybe another door will. That's my only point in this work I've done with SOS. We need these alternatives; we don't need just one true way.

Bill White: Jim, thank you for taking this time to share your experiences and ideas, and thank you for all you have done for people seeking recovery.

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Appendices

SOS-related Reading

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General Principles of SOS (reposted with permission)

All those who sincerely seek sobriety are welcome as members in any SOS Group.

Although sobriety is an individual responsibility, life does not have to be faced alone. The support of other alcoholics and addicts is a vital adjunct to recovery. In SOS., members share experiences, insights, information, strength, and encouragement in friendly, honest, anonymous, and supportive group meetings.

Sobriety is the number one priority in an alcoholic's or addict's life. As such, they must abstain from all drugs or alcohol.

SOS is not a spin-off of any religious group; There is no hidden agenda, as SOS is concerned with sobriety, not religiosity.

SOS seeks only to promote sobriety amongst those who suffer from alcoholism or other drug addictions. As a group, SOS has no opinion on outside matters and does not wish to become entangled in outside controversy.

To avoid unnecessary entanglements, each SOS group is self-supporting through contributions from its members, and refuses outside support.

Honest, clear, and direct communication of feelings, thoughts, and knowledge aids in recovery and in choosing non-destructive, non-delusional, and rational approaches to living sober and rewarding lives.

As knowledge of drinking or addiction might cause a person harm or embarrassment in the outside world, SOS guards the anonymity of its membership and the contents of its discussions from those not within the group.

SOS encourages the scientific study of alcoholism and addiction in all their aspects. SOS does not limit its outlook to one area of knowledge or theory of alcoholism and addiction.

General Guidelines of SOS (reposted with permission)

Purpose

Support groups provide a regular coming together of people with similar problems and concerns in a non-judgemental and safe atmosphere. The members of such a

group are free to work out its structure and the format of its meetings. Meetings usually include a forum for the exchange of information, experiences, and ideas. This exchange is always done in ways that are not threatening to the members and which help validate to the person in pain the realness of his or her experience. The meeting sometimes becomes the one anchor in the new member's current stormy existence.

Self-Help

Support groups of the type we are starting are also “self-help” groups. That is, they operate non-professionally, offering no medical advice or psychotherapy. Instead, the members share their own experiences and understandings, their personal failures and victories. In time, the new member begins to discover what is needed to fit his or her particular situation.

In general, the goal of each group is to support its members while they learn to cope with frustration, despair, and the isolation which brought most of them to the group initially. In addition, each group may want to define its own specific goals and emphasis, if any—always with sobriety as the priority. Unless sobriety is the priority for chemically addicted persons, no amount of personal growth in other areas of life is likely to bring the needed recovery.

Group Variations

The original SOS groups began as groups for alcoholics. These groups have been extremely flexible in accommodating family members and friends of alcoholics and addicts, compulsive overeaters, and those addicted to drugs other than alcohol. Groups of family members are beginning to meet separately now (as an SOS support group) and other groups are in the making. In the meantime, we have been able to explore for ourselves the pros and cons of both open and special interest group meetings.

There are many possibilities. Groups could expand to include all those harmed by dysfunctional families or relationships, regardless of the initial cause of the problem. SOS groups can also be formed wherever a secular alternative is needed for compulsive overeaters, smokers, addicts of a specific drug or of drugs in general, compulsive gamblers, people with sexual obsessions, adult children of alcoholics (or from dysfunctional homes in general), or any other group needing to meet for mutual support. Adults may want to start SOS meetings for teenagers or younger children using drugs or living in dysfunctional homes. If you need support in these or other areas, you can get together with those who share your problems and concerns and help create a secular group to meet those concerns.

Secular Distinction

The word that distinguishes our groups from other, widely available groups is the word “secular.” There are many groups that fit into the category of self-help support groups and that offer roads to recovery from a multitude of problems. But most of these groups imply strongly (and sometimes directly state) that true recovery without dependence on supernatural help is simply not possible. There is usually an insistence that their programs are “spiritual” rather than “religious,” but in the final analysis, many people end up feeling alienated by these meetings and find recovery in these groups only with great difficulty, if at all.

Needless to say, it should never be necessary to compromise integrity in the search for recovery. Nor should anybody be asked to pay lip service to beliefs or rituals that are alien to that person, just so he or she might find acceptance and help. In our less-than-perfect culture, there is a pressing need for more secular alternatives to the existing self-help groups.

We can, perhaps, make a distinction between what we should and should not be asked to do. We certainly should be able to accept a non-secular person’s sharing of experience, even if that experience is of a religious nature. If, however, the person begins to suggest that secular paths to recovery won’t work (that is, tries to tell others that they, too, need to depend on the supernatural), then we may need to meet this pressure with some loving but firm resistance. We might, for example, explain that the person is welcome to share, but not to recruit.

SOS was founded to provide a neutral ground where the alcoholic /addict can safely explore an individual path to recovery. While many of us are atheists, agnostics, and secular humanists, many others are theists of one form or another who simply want a secular recovery environment—separation of church and recovery. There is no reason why religion should ever become a main topic of conversation at our meetings. We can agree with many others that such discussions in self-help support groups of any kind are potentially offensive and generally not productive. Other non-secular groups already exist for this purpose. Our focus is recovery, as a separate issue.

Non-Profit Nature

One thing needs to be said about what our purpose should not be. It should not be to make money for anybody under any circumstances. Early on in its development, after much thought and with good reason, AA formed principles and practices relating to money matters. Our groups, too, will be wise to maintain our autonomy, pay our own way, and keep only as much money in our treasury as is needed for the continuing function of the group. Surplus money is almost sure to create unwanted and unneeded conflict.