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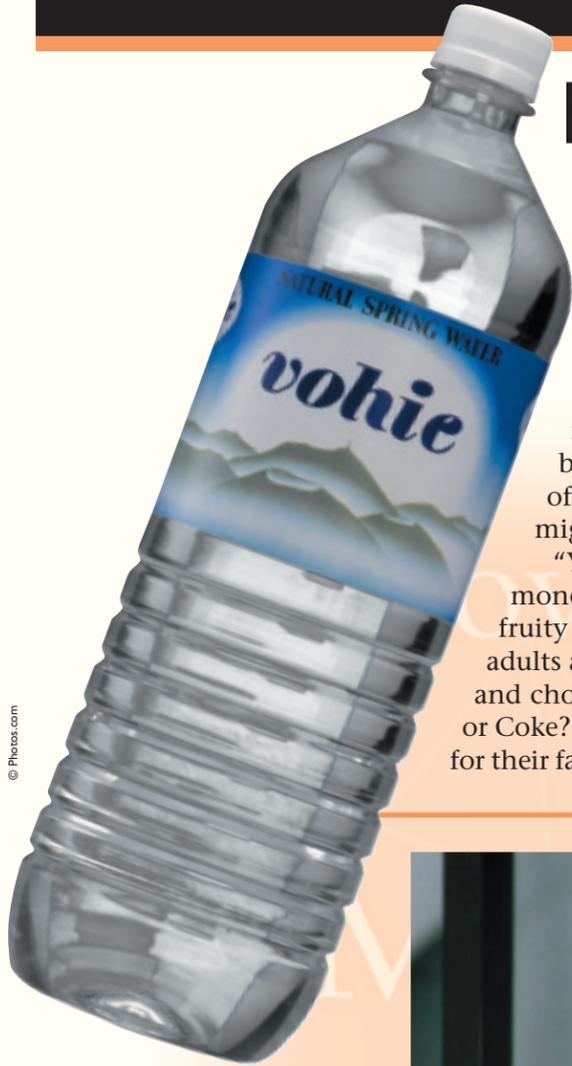
# sample

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# THE LURE OF CULTS

## Bottled Water, Anyone?



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If you had a time machine and could go back thirty or forty years and tell the people you met about life today, there are lots of things they wouldn't believe. They wouldn't believe that computers are now small enough to sit on your desktop, that the internet can provide us with instant information from all over the world, and that hybrid cars can run on gas and batteries. But one of the items that would puzzle them the most might be bottled water.

"You mean," they might say, "people will pay money for water with no flavoring, no fizz, no fruity aftertaste? You're telling me that kids and adults are going to walk into a store or a gas station and choose water over a cold can of Mountain Dew or Coke? And that they'll pay more for the water than for their favorite carbonated beverage? No way!" But it's

true—the bottled water industry has taken off, with competing brands and claims and prices that rival or surpass other drink options.

So how come bottled water sells? People buy bottled water for the same reason they buy other things: it meets a need! Thirsty people need hydration, and water does it best.

Our world is full of people with a spiritual thirst. When they find out they're thirsty for God, they'll do what it takes to do to satisfy their thirst, even if it seems outrageous or ridiculous to others. Some cults may seem as far-fetched to you as bottled water would have been to your great-grandparents. But these new religions are gaining members every year.

Our challenge is to see what these new religious groups are doing to quench the spiritual thirst of our modern world. We need to recognize what they do that attracts people to them. Then we need to consider what we as Christians need to do to bring the Living Water to our thirsty fellow human beings. n

## What's a Cult?

What is a cult?

First, you should know that cults are not the same as sects. **Christian sects usually emphasize one aspect of Christian tradition, while holding to other orthodox views of God, Jesus Christ, and Scripture.** Sects often see themselves as trying to get back to the original true faith, rather than starting a radically new faith. Some people use the Amish as an example of a sect because their beliefs fall within orthodox Christianity but their clothing and lifestyle reflect their emphasis on separating themselves from the world in a unique way from that of other Christian believers.

The dictionary includes six definitions for *cult*, ranging from the broad "formal means of expressing religious reverence; religious ceremony and ritual" to "an exclusive group of persons sharing an esoteric, usually artistic or intellectual interest" (that's an attempt to explain people who go to Star Trek conventions or watch *Rocky Horror Picture Show* over and over).

But a cult is more complicated than a simple def-



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inition can cover. Hear the word "cult" and you probably think of bizarre, unacceptable behavior, but that is not true in every case. Many members of cults are normal law-abiding citizens who have families and ordinary jobs.

Experts disagree on one exact definition, but they do talk about the *beliefs* and *actions* of cults. In terms of beliefs, **a cult is a group that deviates from orthodox religious belief in a significant way.** In Christian cults, these deviations include ideas about God, Jesus, death, salvation, and so on. Cults often claim some special revelation from God by which they reinterpret or

add to generally accepted religious writings, such as the Bible. Maybe you've run into some of these ideas if you've ever talked with a Jehovah's Witness, a Mormon, or a member of the Christian Science church.

On the action side of things, **cults distinguish themselves by distinct lifestyles that are easily recognized by other groups.** This includes behaviors like door-to-door witnessing, abstaining from alcohol, refusing medical attention such as blood transfusions, and other lifestyle choices that you may have heard about. These lifestyle choices are often dictated by a strong

leader who insists on strict discipline and has absolute authority over his or her followers.

For other characteristics of cults, see "Cult Appeal"

on page 4. And keep an eye out for common traits as we learn about various cults in this course. n

### GROUPS STUDIED IN THIS COURSE:

- Jehovah's Witnesses
- Mormons
- Christian Science
- Scientology
- Wicca
- Satanism
- Astrology
- People's Temple
- Branch Davidians
- Heaven's Gate
- Aum Shinrikyo
- Order of the Solar Temple

This course also describes a number of New Age and Occult beliefs and practices.

# Take Me to Your Leader

What makes someone become the leader of a cult group? That's a complicated question to answer—one that involves human sociology, psychology, and probably physiology. But some common characteristics seem to emerge when you study the founding members of cults.

A cult leader is usually a good speaker, someone who can capture an audience's attention and keep it, someone who is charismatic. That explains why many people are attracted to a cult in the first place. And there's nothing wrong with being charismatic. Most of us would prefer to listen to an interesting speaker than a dull one, right?

But most cult leaders are also dominating personalities who are absolutely convinced they are right. They demand total loyalty and obedience from their followers. Some cult leaders are paranoid, believing that others are out to get them and their followers. Many claim that God speaks to them directly and regularly. Some actually think they themselves are sinless messiahs who can save the world.

Sometimes cult leaders grow up in a Christian environment and become familiar with the Bible and the church's teachings. But at some point in their spiritual lives, something goes wrong. Maybe they question the basic beliefs of the church or they have strong doubts. When they express these feelings, they're not satisfied with the answers they receive. Instead of "hanging in there" and struggling through their problems, these individuals react more radically. Maybe they think up a new interpretation of Scripture or a new slant on a troublesome belief. Sometimes they claim a special revelation directly from God. Whatever it is, their approach is rejected by the folks in their church. And so they leave that church and start a new religious group of their own.

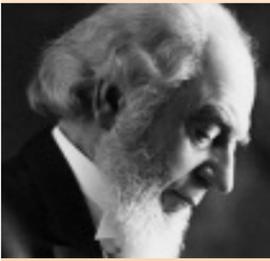
But wait a minute! Wouldn't that make Martin Luther a cult leader? Didn't he leave the Roman Catholic church after deciding that what the church needed was a new way to look at Scripture? Didn't others who founded churches burn at the stake because the established religious groups of the day wouldn't accept them?

Yes, but that doesn't make them cult leaders. Some people see problems in their churches and try to change them. But cult leaders abandon healthy reformation to form new groups of their own making. n

## A SAMPLING OF LEADERS



**Mary Baker Eddy** grew up in a Christian home in the late 1800s but felt the church's teachings spoke only to her head, not her heart. Sickly for most of her life, she experienced a miraculous healing, then wrote a book about science and healing that her followers claimed was divinely inspired and without error. Eventually, she began the Christian Science church, which today claims about 400,000 members.



**Charles Taze Russell** grew up in Presbyterian and Congregational churches, studied the Bible on his own, and came up with new insights that were rejected by his church. He founded the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, which Russell's successor in 1931 renamed the Jehovah's Witnesses.



**Sun Myung Moon**, once a member of the Presbyterian church in Korea, founded the Unification Church (Moonies) in 1954. In 1972 Moon claims to have had a divine revelation telling him to move to the United States, where he convinced thousands of people to give their money and join his church. Though he's spent time in jail for tax evasion, Moon has claimed to be sinless and to have more wisdom than Jesus.



Evangelist **Jim Jones** claimed he was a messiah. In 1978 he ordered his People's Temple followers to move from the San Francisco area to a remote jungle clearing in Guyana, where he told them he would set up an ideal community named Jonestown. A year later he ordered his followers to drink Kool-Aid laced with cyanide, and 914 of them died.



**David Koresh**, a self-proclaimed prophet, and more than 70 of his Branch Davidian followers died in 1993 during a stand-off with federal authorities in Waco, Texas. A huge arsenal was found inside their burned-down headquarters.



**Shoko Asahara**, a self-styled messiah, founded the doomsday cult Aum Shinrikyo (Supreme Truth) and masterminded the 1995 nerve gas attack on the Japanese subway system that killed twelve people and sickened 5,500. n



## BELIEFS IN BRIEF

In this section, we'll usually summarize the beliefs of whatever cults we're studying. Today, we'll summarize key Christian beliefs so we can compare them to those taught by the cults.

**Who is God?** Our God is the triune God who created the world by his power and sustains it in love and mercy. God has a plan for the world and its people, and that plan will come to be. God is almighty, all-knowing, just, and a personal God who cares for each one of us.

**Who is Jesus Christ?** Jesus Christ is God, the eternal Son. He is the second person of the Trinity who came into flesh on earth as 100% God and 100% human. He died on the cross to pay completely for the sin of fallen humans. Then he rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, from where, seated at the Father's side, he rules as Lord of all until his return on judgment day.

**Who is the Holy Spirit?** The Holy Spirit is the third person of the Trinity who, among other things, inspired the writers of the Bible, works in believer's lives to sanctify them, and gives believers the power to speak and witness to who God is and what he has done for them.

**Who are we?** We human beings are created in God's image. That makes us different from the rest of the created order, and unique in God's sight. We all sinned when

Adam—our representative—sinned. Therefore, we all bear a debt we can never repay on our own. Our purpose on earth is to believe the gospel, glorify God in all we do, and live lives of thankfulness for all God has done.

**What makes something a sin?** Sin is the action of rebelling against God. This can happen by what we do and by what we leave undone. We can't live perfect lives no matter how hard we try because our human nature is corrupted by sin and is inclined against God every day.

**How do we obtain salvation?** Our salvation must satisfy the justice of God but we can't make that happen by ourselves. Jesus' death on the cross did it for us.

**What's so special about the Bible?** The Bible is a holy book, perfect and set apart from other books. It is God's authoritative Word to us, inspired by God through human authors, giving us everything we need to know to be saved.

**What's a worldview?** Your worldview is the understanding your basic beliefs give you about the world, your place in it, and how your beliefs should shape your actions and decisions. Reformed Christians believe that every square inch of the world is claimed by Jesus Christ, and that he is Lord of every aspect of our lives—our work, our leisure time, our relationships. A Reformed worldview calls us to serve Christ in all we say, think, and do. n

**"I AM THE  
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## Litmus Tests and Plumb Lines

Remember in science class when you tested a solution to determine if it was an acid or a base? You used little strips of white litmus paper that would turn blue-green or red-orange depending on the properties of the solution into which they were dipped. Liquids that appeared to be identical could produce very different litmus results. You couldn't really tell what they were made of until you applied the test.

Christianity also has a litmus test. It's Jesus Christ. Groups that may appear to look and even sound similar to Christianity on the outside have very different views of who Jesus is and what he did. Some groups say Jesus is a good prophet, even one of the best. Some strongly believe he is a teacher of truths and a doer of miracles. Many people think Jesus is an excellent example for all of us of how to live a good life. But dip that strip of Scripture in just a little deeper: is Jesus Christ the eternal Son of God who died on a cross to save

us from our sin? The answer is so much more important than any science lab grade. Fritz Ridenour in his book *So What's the Difference?* writes about another standard of measurement when it comes to studying other religions. He uses the analogy of a plumb line. A plumb line serves to help brick masons keep a wall straight and true to the plans. It also helps people who hang wallpaper keep the seams perpendicular to the floor.

Ridenour suggests that Paul's words about Jesus in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 serve as a plumb line—an important standard to apply whenever you wonder if a group is truly Christian or not: "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures . . . he was buried . . . he was raised on the third day. . . ."

So one thing you should always ask about any group you think might be a cult is this: What does this group believe about Jesus Christ?

The answer makes all the difference in the world. n

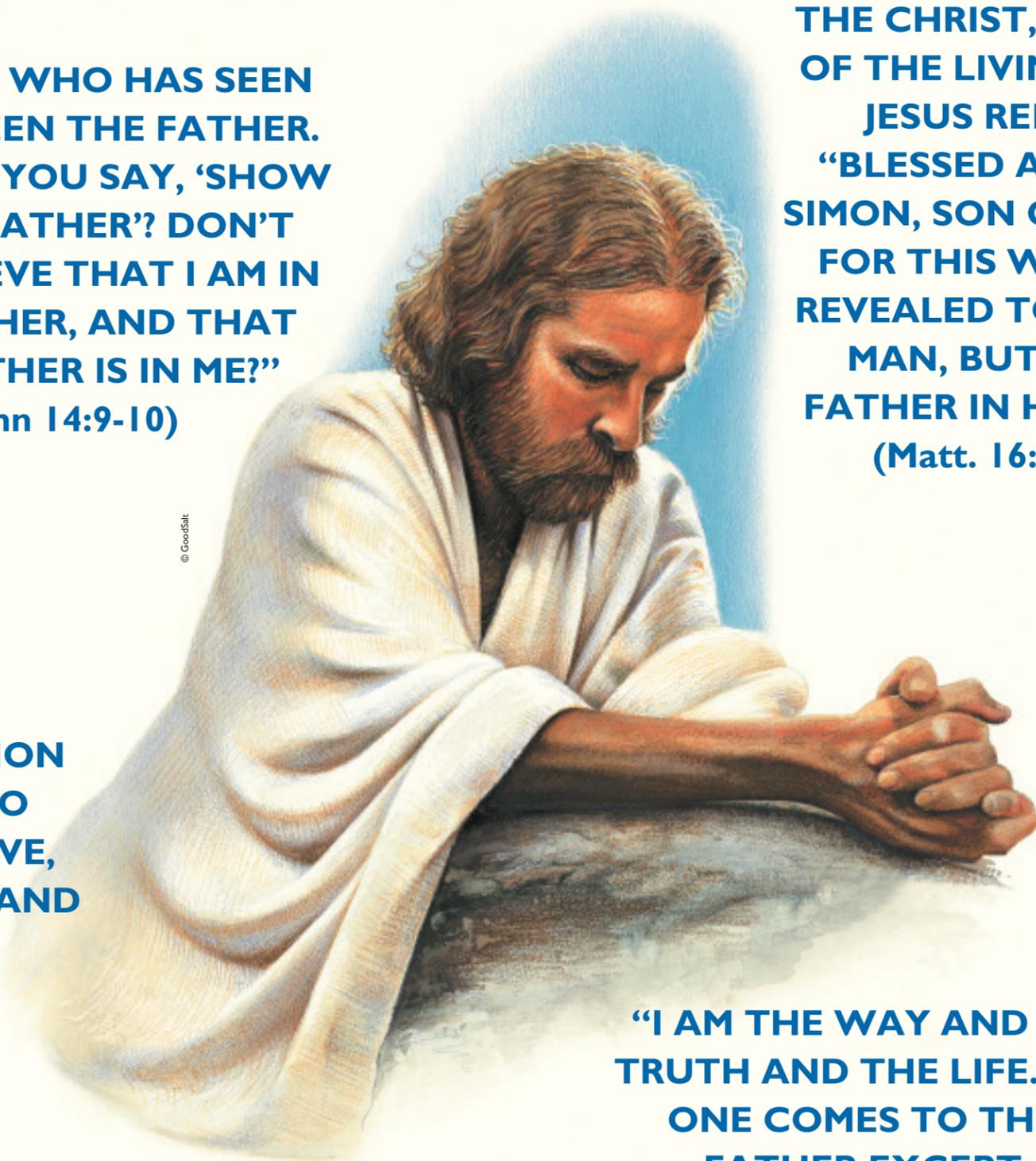


**"ANYONE WHO HAS SEEN ME HAS SEEN THE FATHER. HOW CAN YOU SAY, 'SHOW US THE FATHER'? DON'T YOU BELIEVE THAT I AM IN THE FATHER, AND THAT THE FATHER IS IN ME?"**

**(John 14:9-10)**

**RESURRECTION LIFE. HE WHO BELIEVES IN ME WILL LIVE, EVEN THOUGH HE DIES; AND WHOEVER BELIEVES IN ME WILL NEVER DIE."**

**(John 11:25)**



**"I AM THE WAY AND THE TRUTH AND THE LIFE. NO ONE COMES TO THE FATHER EXCEPT THROUGH ME."**

**(John 14:6)**

## The Mission of God's People

Following the apostles, the church is sent—sent with the gospel of the kingdom to make disciples of all nations, to feed the hungry, and to proclaim the assurance that in the name of Christ

there is forgiveness of sin and new life for all who repent and believe—to tell the news that our world belongs to God. In a world estranged from God, where millions face confusing choices, this mission is central to our being, for we announce the name that saves. n

—OUR WORLD BELONGS TO GOD, ST. 44

**"BUT WHAT ABOUT YOU?" HE ASKED. "WHO DO YOU SAY I AM?"**

**SIMON PETER**

**ANSWERED: "YOU ARE THE CHRIST, THE SON OF THE LIVING GOD."**

**JESUS REPLIED:**

**"BLESSED ARE YOU, SIMON, SON OF JONAH, FOR THIS WAS NOT REVEALED TO YOU BY MAN, BUT BY MY FATHER IN HEAVEN."**

**(Matt. 16:15-17)**

# Marcia's Story: A Strange but True Spiritual Journey

by Marcia Montenegro

Spirit guides, meditation, astrology, the “higher Self,” raising the kundalini, developing psychic abilities, praying to gurus, astral travel, numerology, Tarot cards, contacting the dead, hanging out with witches, Sufis, followers of Muktananda, Rajneesh, Sai Baba, Maharaji,— all these and more were part of my journey. How did I get on this path?

## The Beginnings

I grew up with an agnostic father and a mother who was raised going to church. My sister and I had to attend church, because my mother thought that was the right thing to do, although she did not always go. Due to my father's job in the Foreign Service, we moved around a lot, so we ended up in different churches lo-

Also, I never fit in during my high school years. Being someone who wrote poetry, being in an alcoholic home, having no real roots all combined to make me feel different and unlike other people. I started my journey at the end of high school.

That journey continued through college where I had paranormal experiences, made friends with someone who said she saw auras, and attended spiritualist meetings where the ministers received messages from the dead.

One bright sunny Florida afternoon, as I rested on my bed fully awake with eyes partly closed, I felt myself floating. I opened my eyes and was stunned to see my body on the bed below me as I hovered near the ceil-



PALMISTRY, RUNES, AND TAROT CARDS

cated overseas and in the Washington, DC, area.

Eventually, I became serious about religion. In high school, I had the idea that being good would please God and get me into heaven. But reading about other religions and meeting those who believed differently made me wonder. Maybe there was more to it than what I had—some knowledge of God and Jesus which was mostly superficial. I wanted something deeper, more experiential. I was also rejecting the idea of hell and was disillusioned with Christians. Christianity seemed defined by sermons, going to Sunday School, and doing good works. How boring! I was missing out on something!

ing. I thought I had died. The shock slammed me back into my body in an almost painful way. This was my first out-of-body experience and I had no idea what it was or that it even had a name. I told no one about it.

[Later] . . . when I visited psychics and an astrologer, and did a lot of reading on the paranormal, and about Hindu and Buddhist beliefs. . . . I started to see connections in my life with the colors of the chakras, the seven psychic centers of energy in the body according to Hindu beliefs. This and other experiences pushed me into an active plunge into the alluring worlds of the paranormal and Eastern beliefs.

## Cult Appeal

How do cults attract people? Here are just a few things that draw some people to them. Notice that each trait has a negative as well as a positive side

APPEAL	COMMENT
Clear, unambiguous answers to hard questions	All beliefs are explained in a way that allows for no deviation or exception, creating a kind of closed-mindedness; all doctrines are clear-cut.
United against opposition	Those who treat members unkindly or who openly oppose them are considered enemies. May be antagonistic toward Christians.
Strong bonds between members	Members often live communally, away from society, forming a group that is isolated but has tight bonds.
Strong sense of belonging, being loved, and being accepted	Members feel a sense of belonging because the group accepts them as they are and makes them feel important. Strong “group mentality.”
Strong sense of commitment	Members agree on what they believe and stand for. They are completely committed to the cult. However, cults are sometimes accused of using brainwashing or mind control—such as lack of food or sleep and solitary confinement—to make members accept their teachings and practices.
Charismatic, powerful, inspiring leader	Most cults are led by strong individuals who demand (and get) complete loyalty and obedience from members. Leaders make all key decisions for the group, and fully believe they are absolutely right. Some may be paranoid or suffer other forms of psychological or emotional disorders.
Many cults emphasize clean living, doing the right thing, etc.	By doing what their leader says, cult members gain acceptance, a sense of worth, and even salvation. That stands in opposition to the Christian teaching that salvation is by grace alone in Jesus Christ.

## ANOTHER VIEW

In addition to all these reasons for joining a cult, some people join because cults seem fun or interesting. “People I met who became witches derived pleasure from mastering the arcane intricacies of astrology, cabala, mythology and the lore of herbal medicine,” says anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann in *U.S. News and World Report* (April 7, 1997). “They pored over books and charts. They became experts. . . . Many cultlike groups practice techniques of spiritual ecstasy—meditation, visualization, trance—that are used the world over and are very compelling.”

## Into the Fire

In an Inner Light Consciousness class, I was introduced to my “spiritual master” during a guided visualization. This guide, a spirit being, looked kind and wise. I felt his presence with me and sometimes saw him in dreams and meditations. . . . I also had unpleasant, scary and weird experiences and visitations, once seeing a tall hooded figure in dark robes looking at my body in the bed as I hovered out-of-body nearby. Although extremely frightened by this apparition, I rationalized it by telling myself that I was being tested. To me, the paranormal was spiritual, and spiritual was good.

Another reason I accepted the scary stuff was my attitude. I liked to think I was tough and nothing could frighten me away. So I would think, “Go ahead, scare me. I can take it!” I had a lot of anger and defiance in me which probably came from dealing with an alcoholic parent. . . .

I also learned to meditate, do psychic healing, analyze dreams, and chant. It was mystical and magic. When I first started to do Eastern

meditation, I felt an incredible peace. I felt that I was fading away and merging with something greater. . . . I also started practicing astrology, and eventually I taught astrology, gave public talks, wrote for astrological and New Age journals. . . .

Yet, with all the knowledge and experience I had acquired, what were the answers?

[Editor's note: Marcia's spiritual search was sometimes scary and bizarre. But she found peace after she felt compelled to attend a church service. Marcia realized that she had “rejected and defied God,” and she saw that the path of reconciliation to God was through Jesus Christ.] n

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TAROT CARDS