



# The Warning Signs of Dangerous Esoteric Groups

Frater Robert Gordon  
January 2023





# Are You in a Cult?

- Cults vs. New Religious Movements.
- Spirituality is a vulnerable aspect of the human condition.
- Esoteric groups are by their nature more secretive and obscure.
- Important to be able to answer questions from friends/family
- Anything requiring secrecy or discretion must be built on empathy and integrity.
- All of us should go through a process of discernment about the groups we are involved with.
- There is no single answer to the question of what is or isn't a dangerous group – must be considered on a case-by-case basis.

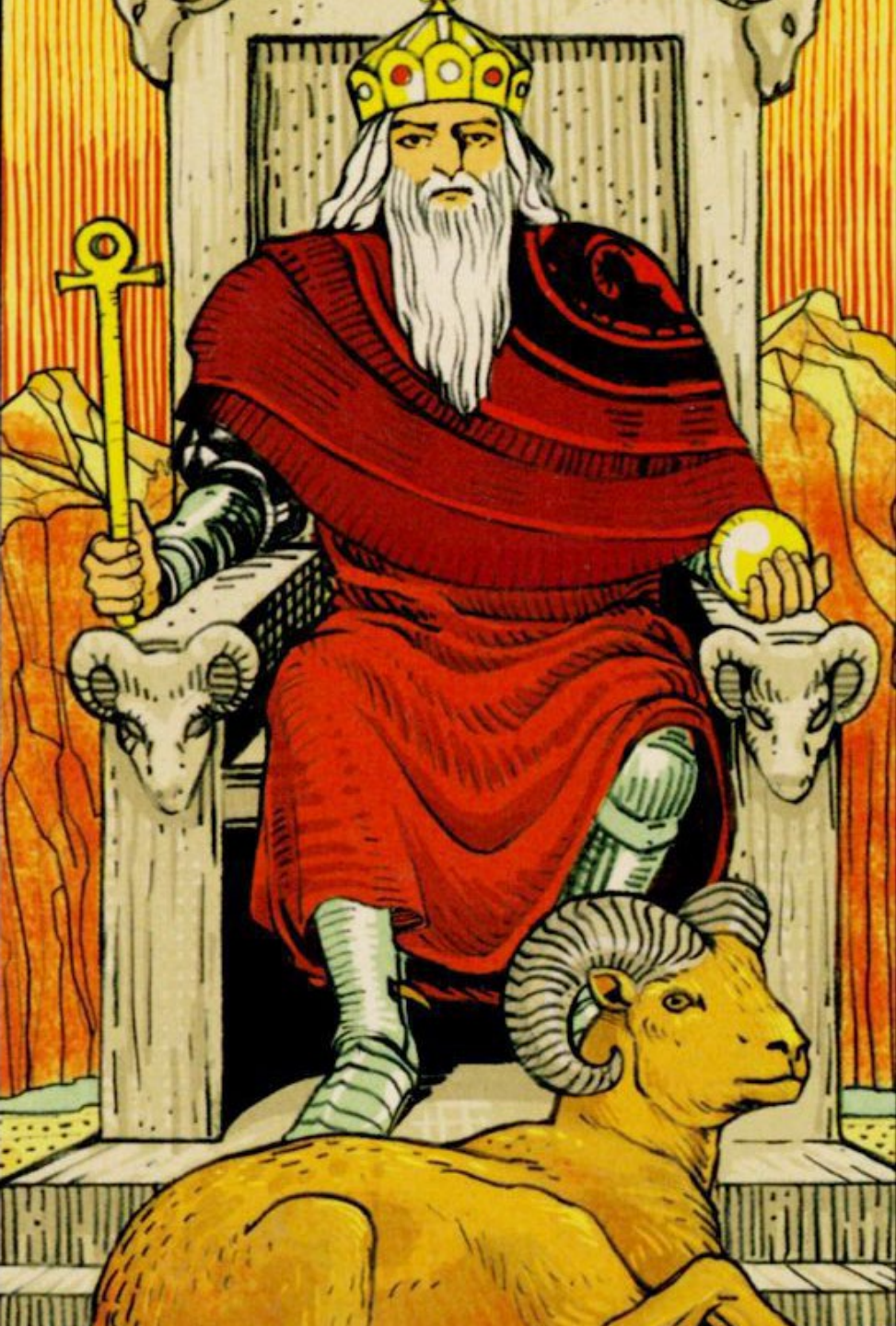




## Warning Signs of Dangerous Groups

- Group dynamics have been closely studied by psychologists and the social sciences.
- The list presented here is my own construction, based on research and experience.
  - Builds upon work of Steve Hassan and Rick Ross.
- Requires multiple red flags to combine into something we could call 'dangerous'.
- We will look at both positive and negative ways these things can manifest.
- Importantly, sometimes these factors apply to smaller groups within a larger organisation – a particular lodge, college, temple etc.





# 1. Singular Authority

The group is focused on the authority and teachings of one person, living or dead.

| Red Flags   | Green Flags   |
|---|---|
| Teachings of one individual are quoted as scripture.      | Discussion of other traditions or teachers is encouraged.                                     |
| Criticism of the group leader/s is punished or chastised. | Leader states they are not infallible or divine.  |
| Images of the leader are prevalent.                       | Group activities, teachings and practices are decentralised.                                  |
| Leader demands a one-to-one relationship to progress.     | When focused on individual/s from the past, examines both positive/negative sides of history. |





## 2. Strict Hierarchies

There are strict hierarchies in place, with deference to senior members.

### Red Flags

Higher grades are considered to have power over others.

Bonding between members of the same rank is discouraged.

Lower grades are not given the opportunity to speak.

Grades are given inconsistently and reward loyalty.

Decisions made are not transparently communicated.

### Green Flags

Understanding that rank does not equal spiritual attainment.

Members of all grades are encouraged to contribute.

Systems for advancement are codified and consistently given.

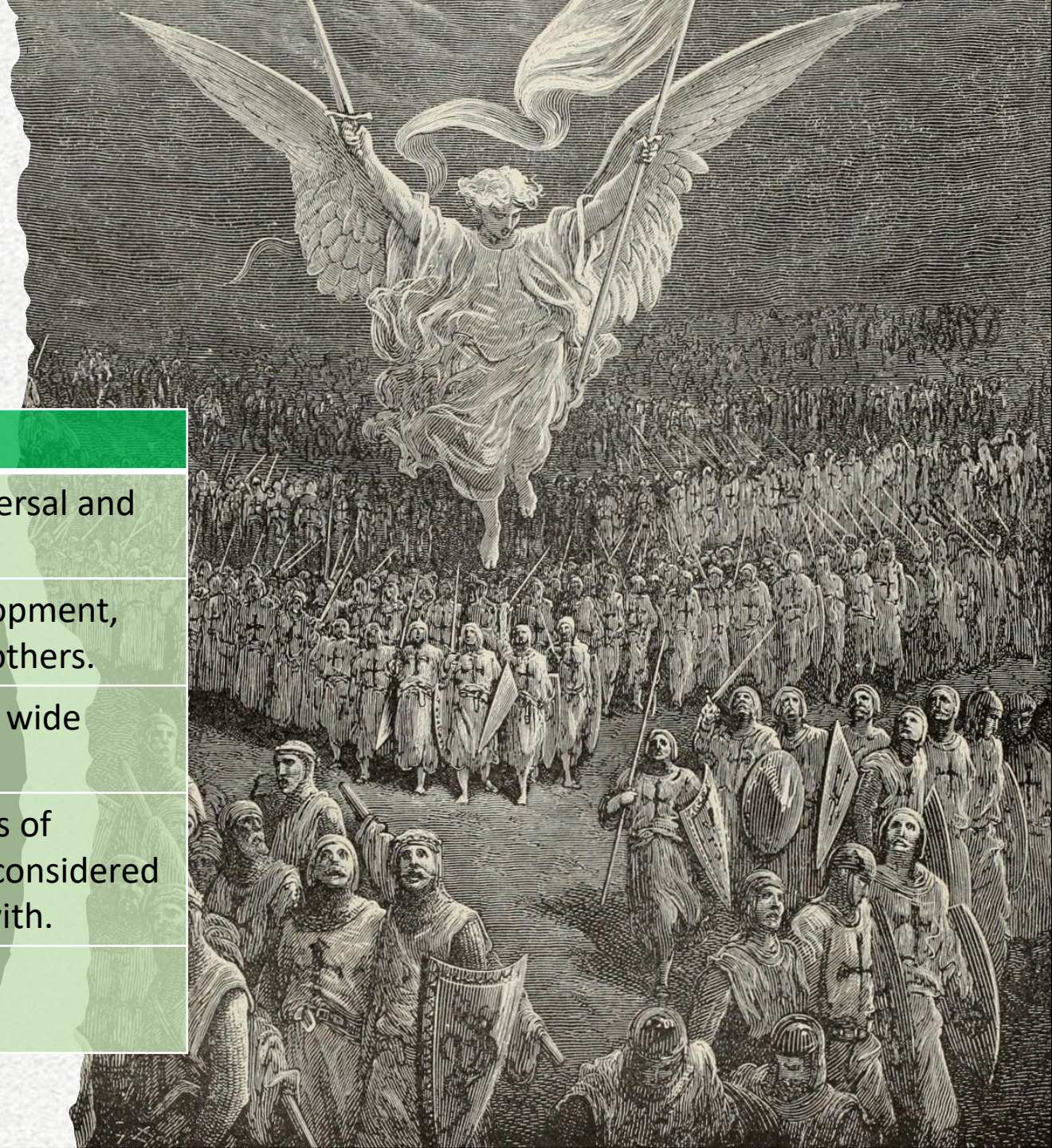
Regular changing of people in roles of authority.



# 3. Us vs Them

The group fosters an us vs. them mentality, often in militant terms.

| Red Flags  | Green Flags  |
|--|--|
| The group speak of themselves as spiritual warriors.               | Group causes are universal and not just for members.                                 |
| Constant references to enemies of the group.                       | Focused on self-development, rather than attacking others.                           |
| Action is inspired by opposition.                                  | Group interacts with a wide range of people.   |
| Members asked to act for the 'greater good'.                       | There aren't categories of people/organisations considered forbidden to engage with. |
| Emphasis on being on the 'right side' in fight against oppressors. |  |







## 4. Altered States

Practices designed to create altered states of consciousness are central.

### Red Flags

Altered states are followed by ideological teachings.

Interpretation of experiences are placed in unique terms.

Practices are stated to give superhuman powers or healing ability.

Practices conducted for long periods of time, often to exhaustion.

### Green Flags

Practices are introduced slowly and carefully, with open discussion.

Experiences are seen as having different possible interpretations.

Made clear that there's no single approach that will fit everyone.

Members are encouraged to discuss practices without oversight.





## 5. Abusive Behaviour

Abusive behaviours (whether physical, emotional or sexual) are justified through teachings.

| Red Flags   | Green Flags   |
|---|---|
| Members are humiliated in front of others.                              | Group has compassion for others and their experience.                                   |
| Atmosphere of fear exists within meetings.                              | Intense activities are conducted carefully and with full explanation.                   |
| Teachings are given one-to-one that contain sexual and/or painful acts. | Leaders actively discourage parasocial and/or emotional connections to form.            |
| Members feel pressured to conduct acts by others in a group setting.    | Safeguarding rules are in place to protect emotional and physical wellbeing of members. |





## 6. Disconnection

Members are cut off from contact with ex-members, including family and friends.

### Red Flags

Contact with ex-members is not allowed or highly discouraged.

Ex-members are spoken about judgementally.

No discussion allowed of why members left or reasons for doing so.

Criticism is met with attempts to slander or character assassinate.

### Green Flags

Members are allowed to join and leave freely, without pressure.

Criticism of the group is not hidden or dismissed, open for discussion.

Ex-members remain in contact with people in the group for genuine reasons.



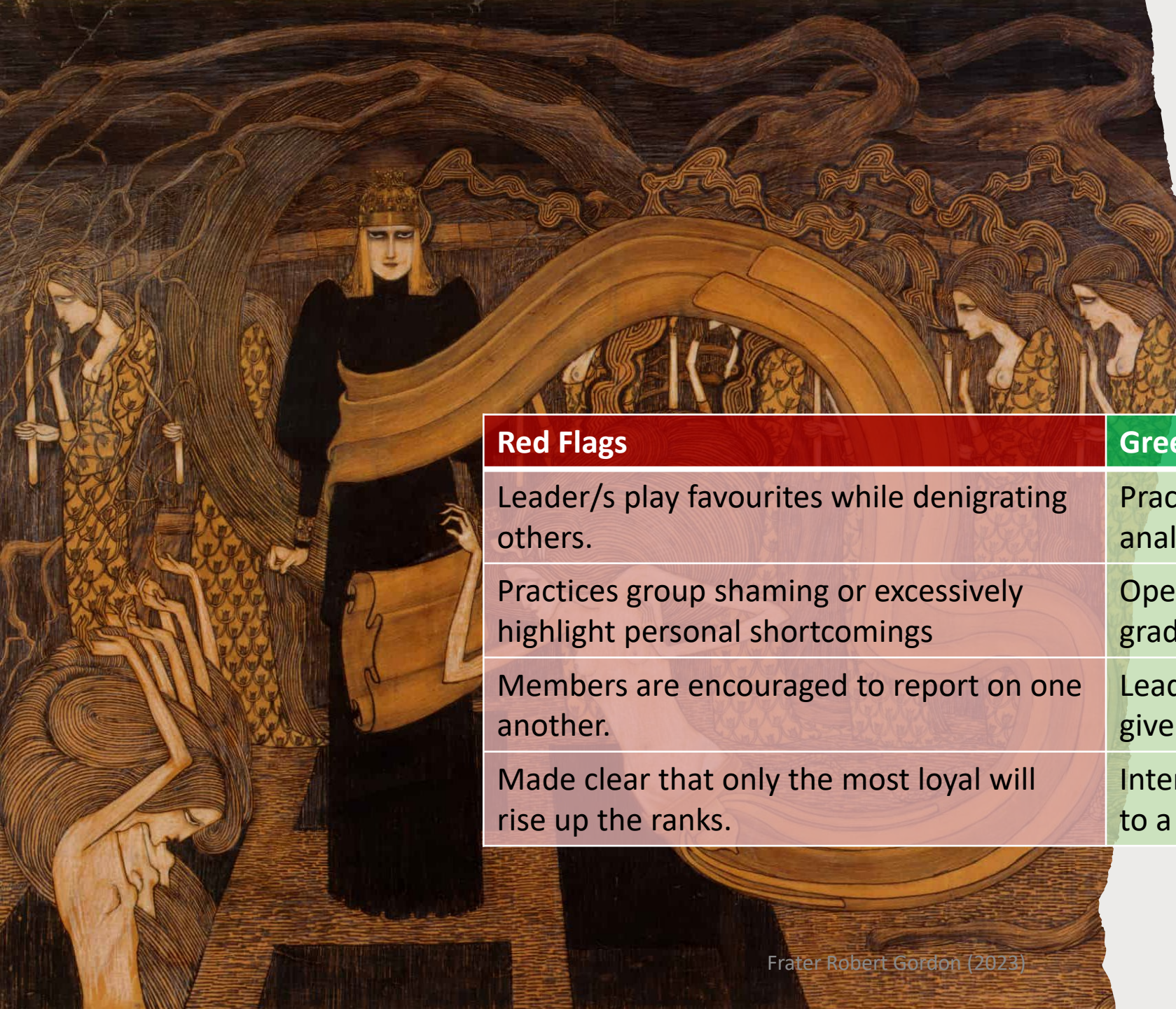
# 7. Money & Recruitment

There is an emphasis on financial gain and/or recruitment.

| Red Flags  | Green Flags  |
|--|--|
| Communications are coupled with requests for money or recruitment. | Goods and services are reasonably priced, preferably non-profit.         |
| Members must pay for goods and services to progress spiritually.   | Different activities offered that allow all members to participate.      |
| Recruitment is tasked to members.                                  | Donations and recruitment are not seen as the primary way to contribute. |
| Status is linked to financial contributions.                       |  |







## 8. Competitive Setting

Behaviours are encouraged that place members in competition.

### Red Flags

Leader/s play favourites while denigrating others.

Practices group shaming or excessively highlight personal shortcomings

Members are encouraged to report on one another.

Made clear that only the most loyal will rise up the ranks.

### Green Flags

Practices encourage introspection and self-analysis in a supportive environment.

Openly stated that organisation ranks or grades are not signs of spiritual progress.

Leader/s do not have clear favourites, but give time to members as much as possible.

Interpersonal gossip and criticism are kept to a minimum.

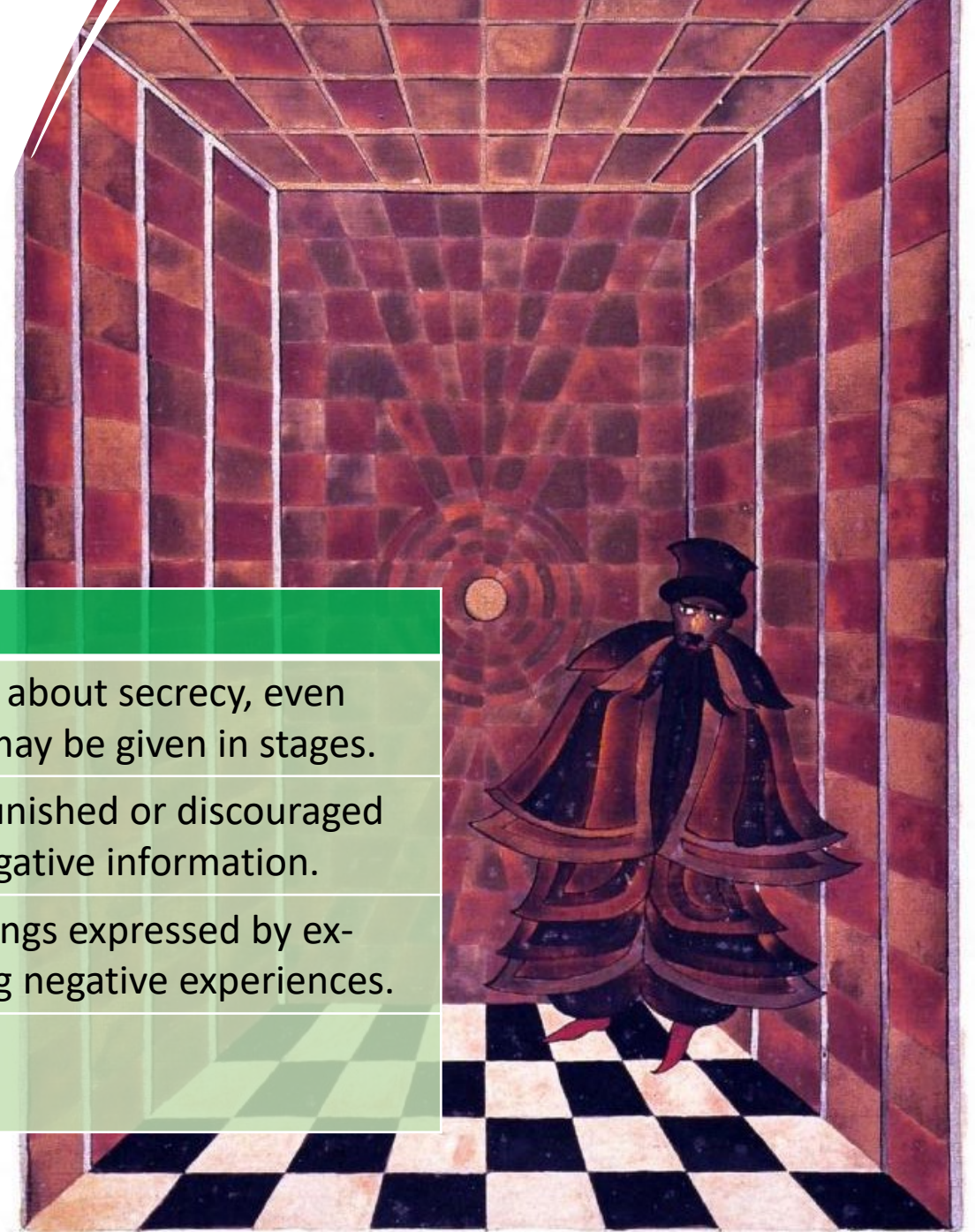


# 9. Control of Information

Public information about the group and its reputation is a primary focus.

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| Red Flags  | Green Flags   |
|--|---|
| Aggressively organise to combat critical information.            | Not overly worried about secrecy, even though teachings may be given in stages. |
| Discussion of critical information is not allowed.               | Members aren't punished or discouraged from discussing negative information.    |
| Group is subject to a lot of criticism from ex-members.          | Wide range of feelings expressed by ex-members, including negative experiences. |
| Controls are put in place to limit member access to information. |   |





# 10. Focused on End Times

Teachings are continually focused on an 'end times', 'ascension' or cataclysmic event to come.

## Red Flags

Teachings focused on imminent end times, constant sense of threat.

Members are told if they leave, they will not be 'saved'.

Alarmism used to build loyalty and demand self-sacrifice.

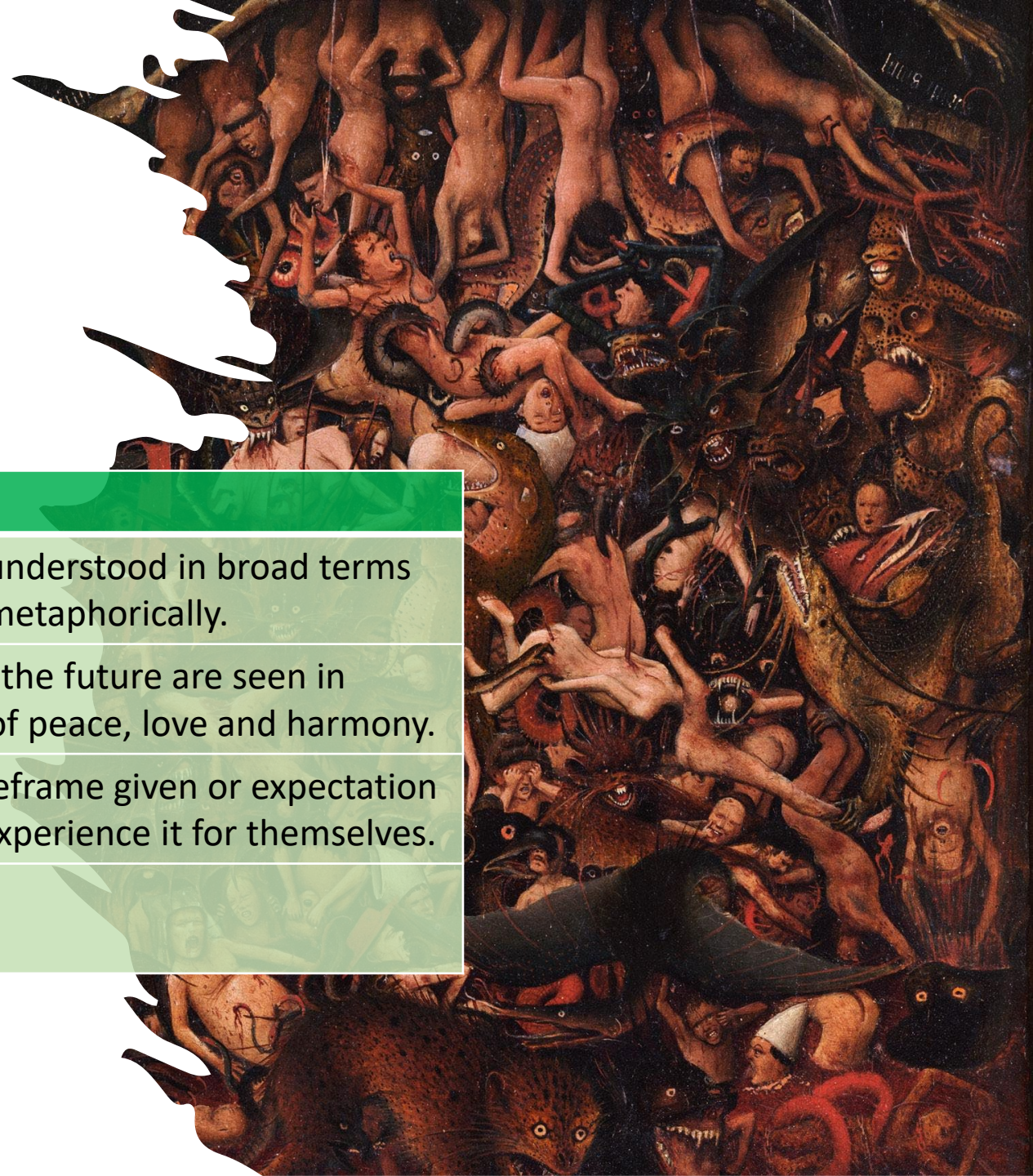
Outsiders seen to suffer or miss out on final redemption.

## Green Flags

Eschatology is understood in broad terms and discussed metaphorically.

Conceptions of the future are seen in utopian forms of peace, love and harmony.

There is no timeframe given or expectation members will experience it for themselves.





# Digital Platforms

Platforms such as Patreon, Discord and Facebook have brought new mediums of expression, community and control.



| Red Flags   | Green Flags   |
|---|---|
| Subscription tiers segregate the community and create a hierarchy among members.            | Single subscription tier for all members, or higher tiers do not grant higher status.       |
| Top-tiers provide one-to-one access to the group leader/s in a master/student relationship. | Group leader/s refer to community members as equals and with gratitude.                     |
| Community channels often erupt into interpersonal issues or forms of 'shunning'.            | Few expectations placed on community members to spend money, volunteer or commit publicly.  |
| Group identity is based on a specific 'influencer' and encourages parasocial relationships. | Community moderation is consistent and with clear guidelines for behaviour applied equally. |
| Members are heavily marketed to with products, services, workshops, or other paid services. |   |



# Conclusion

- All of us must ask ourselves the question: *am I in the right place?*
- Most groups will display one or more potential areas of concern, so it depends how they are manifest.
- The internet provides new challenges that we must be aware of.
- Exploring the *why* rather than just the *what* of esotericism is important.
- Leaving a group can be a challenging process, that requires support.
- We each have a role to play in ensuring the groups we belong to are uplifting and safe environments.

