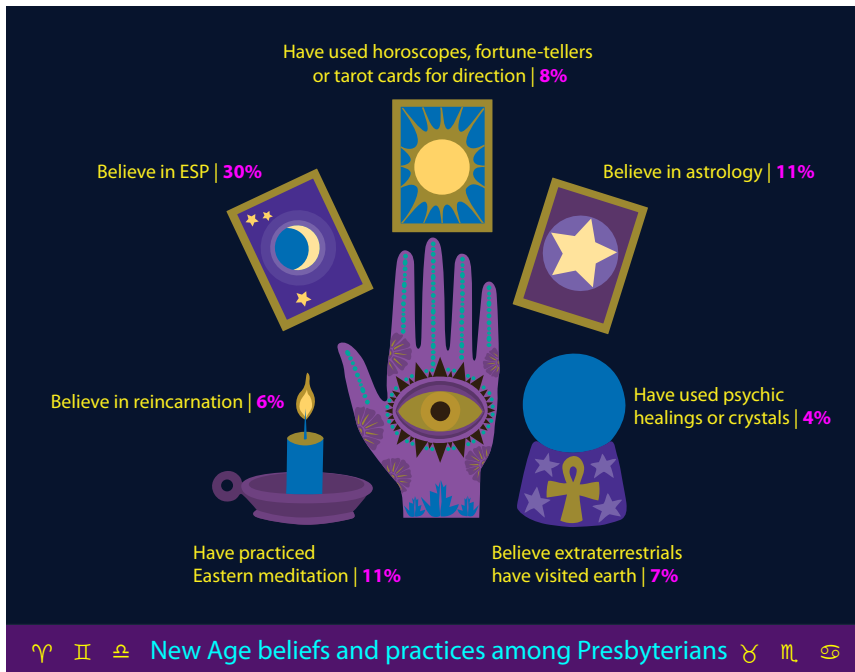


New Age Presbyterians



We recently asked a national sample of Presbyterian worshippers about beliefs and behaviors that might be characterized as New Age. The following results are from the U.S. Congregational Life Survey conducted by Research Services:

- **Almost one in three worshippers (30 percent)** believe in extra-sensory perception (ESP).
- **One in six (16 percent) report regularly reading their horoscope or astrological forecast** in a newspaper or magazine, although somewhat fewer (11 percent) believe that the position of the stars and planets influences people's lives.
- **Even fewer have sought direction from a horoscope, fortune-teller or tarot cards** (8 percent) or explored or used psychic healing or crystals (4 percent) in the previous five years.
- **One in nine (11 percent) have practiced Eastern meditation** over that same period.
- **Half as many (6 percent) believe in reincarnation**—that after death our souls return to earth in another body.
- **Similar numbers (7 percent) believe that extraterrestrial beings** in spacecraft have visited the earth.

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» **Other findings** www.pcusa.org/research

What the research shows

Most of these percentages are quite low. In contrast, New Age beliefs in the population at large are much more common. According to a 2009 Pew survey, 25 percent of U.S. adults believe in astrology and 24 percent in reincarnation; 14 percent have consulted a psychic or fortune-teller.

The Presbyterian numbers also seem especially low in an era when Americans increasingly shun received wisdom and instead pick and choose their own beliefs. Presbyterians are not immune to this tendency, however; in response to another question on the same survey, 42 percent of PC(USA) worshippers agreed that individuals should arrive at their own religious beliefs independent of any church.

Despite that finding, most Presbyterians are actually quite traditional in their beliefs. In response to other questions on the survey, large majorities expressed their acceptance of various orthodox doctrines: 89 percent believe in the existence of heaven; 85 percent, in life after death; 80 percent, in the resurrection of Jesus; 75 percent, in the second coming of Jesus; and 69 percent, in the existence of hell. Most of the other respondents said they were “unsure.” Only small percentages rejected each of these doctrines: 2 percent, 3 percent, 7 percent, 5 percent and 10 percent, respectively.

Why isn't the New Age more of a threat? My guess is that its teachings and practices are so at odds with those of the church that their heretical nature is self-evident. Try to picture a session consulting tarot cards or horoscopes; the image is absurd.

Whatever the reason, these results are worth savoring; in a world with many forces arrayed against the church, it's good to count one small victory.