

# ASCENSION, INC.

*Who actually controls the spiritual pipeline — from the ancient gatekeepers to the algorithm — and how everyone became a spiritual gangster selling you the climb*

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A full exposé · companion to “The Architecture of Spiritual Control”

Prepared for Kristen Hall · June 2026

**The claim.** The deep material is still there — the ancient texts, the real practices, the genuine traditions. Almost no one touches it. Instead, spirituality reaches people pre-chewed: a fifteen-second clip telling them who is “really” enlightened and how to ascend in five steps. The traditions did not get more available; they got flattened into content, and a new class of gatekeepers now stands between people and their own inner life — the same job the temple scribe and the mystery-cult initiator did, rebranded with a ring light.

**What this exposé does.** It follows the control. It names who sits at each chokepoint — the influencer, the platform, the wellness-industrial complex — traces the line from ancient gatekeeping to algorithmic gatekeeping, examines whether even the “divine feminine” we are handed (Sophia) is a liberation or a leash, and looks at the curse economy festering in the same feed. The target is the racket, not belief itself.

## Contents

## I. The Pipeline: Who Is Actually in Control

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Start with the honest question — who controls what reaches a person when they go looking for the sacred? In a feed economy the answer is three layers, none of which the seeker chose.

### Layer one: the influencer as priest

Traditional religious authority was tied to a place — a temple, a church, a lineage. The spiritual influencer is bound to nothing and reaches everyone, and audiences routinely assign credibility by follower count alone, with no background check, no training, no accountability. We have made moral and spiritual authorities out of people whose only credential is engagement. Commentators who study this point out that advising on spiritual and moral matters carries far higher stakes than recommending a product, yet the same metrics govern both, and the COVID years accelerated the migration of spiritual trust onto Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok.

### Layer two: the algorithm as oracle

The platform itself becomes a quasi-divine authority. Researchers studying “conspirituality” content find that users read the unpredictability of the recommendation algorithm as *mystical* — the feed as fate. The creed of the genre is the phrase “whoever needs to see it, will see it,” which reframes an engagement-optimization engine as cosmic delivery. Meanwhile the medium fights the message: short-form video runs on dopamine and what marketers bluntly call the decline of attention spans, which is the precise opposite of the contemplation and presence these very videos claim to teach.

### Layer three: the wellness-industrial complex

Behind the creators sits an industry. The global wellness market — which folds in the spiritual-products and services economy — is valued in the trillions, and the funnel is consistent: astrology apps, paid manifestation courses, healing sessions, crystals marketed as life-changing, decks and memberships. Genuine teaching gets blended with self-promotion until the line disappears, and the structural result is a culture of dependency — people trained to reach outward, to the charismatic source, for validation they are told is inner wisdom. Freedom is the brand; dependency is the product.

**The tell.** Every one of these layers points the seeker away from their own direct experience and back toward a person, a platform, or a purchase. That is not a side effect. A pipeline that returned people to unmediated access would have nothing left to sell.

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## II. The Spiritual Gangster and the Ascension Pitch

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There is an aesthetic now — part guru, part hustle-culture — where everyone is a *spiritual gangster*: serenely superior, lightly enlightened, and ready to tell you exactly how to ascend. It is worth saying plainly why it grates, because the discomfort is diagnostic.

### Everyone is an authority; no one did the work

The ascension pitch — “five signs you're awakening,” “do this to raise your vibration,” “here's how I ascended” — collapses what every serious tradition treats as decades of disciplined practice into a swipe. Nobody is reading the book. Nobody is sitting in the years of process. The performance of arrival

has replaced the work of arriving, and because the format rewards confidence over depth, the loudest and best-lit voice wins, not the most practiced one.

### Spiritual narcissism, sold back as transcendence

Scholars of religion describe what this medium does to the “higher self” idea: in a space built on self-display, the pursuit of transcendence curdles into spiritual narcissism — an elevation of the self dressed as dissolution of it. The same dynamic shows up as spiritual bypassing: using “love and light,” “good vibes only,” and ascension language to skip past grief, conflict, injustice, and ordinary human difficulty rather than move through them. The content promises to lift you above your life; mostly it teaches you to photograph being above it.

**Why it reads as “sick.”** Inner work is one of the few things humans do that cannot be performed for an audience without being deformed by the performance. The spiritual-gangster economy takes the most private, slowest, least monetizable process a person has and turns it into a flex and a sales funnel. Laughing at it is the healthy reaction; the quieter cost is the people who believe it and end up further from themselves than when they started.

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## III. Ancient to Present: Same Lock, New Key

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This is not new behavior wearing new clothes by accident. It is the oldest behavior in religious history, ported to a new medium. Two ancient levers ran the whole system, and both are alive on your feed.

1. **Control of the text.** For most of history, whoever could read and interpret scripture controlled what it meant for everyone who could not. Literacy was the gate. Today the gate is reading at all: the ancient material sits in the open, and the bottleneck is that the work of actually studying it has been outsourced to someone summarizing it badly in a caption.
2. **Engineered initiation.** Mystery cults and graded orders revealed knowledge only to the “worthy,” manufacturing scarcity to make the gatekeeper necessary. The influencer reproduces this exactly — tiered courses, “closed” teachings, paid inner circles, the implication that real ascension is one purchase deeper.

There is also a quieter corruption: the *telephone game*. Practices get stripped from the traditions that gave them meaning, simplified for a thirty-second runtime, mixed with three unrelated systems, and passed on by someone who learned them from another caption. By the time a teaching reaches the feed it can be several lossy copies removed from anything a lineage would recognize — and it arrives stamped with total confidence.

Map this onto the control frameworks in the companion brief and it lines up cleanly: the platform supplies *milieu control* (it curates the entire informational world you see); the guru supplies *sacred science* (doctrine beyond question, leader beyond criticism); and the worthiness-gate — you are not yet ascended, not yet healed, not yet enough — is the same engine of manufactured insufficiency, now A/B tested for clicks. The mechanism did not change. It got faster, cheaper, and paid by the impression.

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## IV. The Sophia Problem: Even the Goddess Came Pre-Packaged

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Which brings us to the figure handed to seekers as the great feminine corrective — Sophia, divine Wisdom. The instinct to be suspicious of her is correct, and it is shared by serious scholars. Read the actual myth before accepting the marketing.

### What the story actually says

In the dominant Gnostic telling (the *Apocryphon of John*, *Pistis Sophia*), Sophia is the youngest divine emanation who desires to know the unknowable Father. Her error — the cosmic catastrophe that produces the entire flawed material world — is that she acts *alone*: without her male consort, without permission, without the balance of the paired masculine-feminine. From her unsanctioned, independent act comes a “monstrosity,” the arrogant false god who builds the broken universe. She is then seized by shame, falls, suffers, and must be redeemed — in the Christian-Gnostic versions, by a male savior, the Logos, who descends to restore her.

**Read that structurally.** A female figure's autonomy — her desire to know without male sanction — is written as the origin of all suffering. Her independent creation is defective by definition. Her restoration requires a male agent. That is not an accident of plot; it is a theology of female overreach and necessary male correction, encoded as cosmology. The read that it sounds like a man's story about a woman held back, reduced to ‘the creation,’ is not a misreading. It is one of the standard scholarly readings.

### The scholars who say so

Feminist religious scholarship makes the point directly: much of Sophia's treatment in the biblical and Christian tradition reinforces patriarchal values, and she repeatedly functions as a mediator — pointing toward God rather than standing as divine herself — which props up male authority rather than challenging it. Theologian Elizabeth Johnson traced how the feminine Wisdom (Sophia) was quietly replaced by the masculine Word (Logos) as it became socially awkward, in an increasingly patriarchal church, to interpret a male Jesus through a female image of God. The feminine divine was not honored; it was absorbed and renamed.

### The honest other side

There is a genuine reclamation reading, and fairness requires it. Many feminist and Jungian writers read Sophia the opposite way — as active rather than passive, central rather than subordinate, a figure whose fall, error, and self-driven return model agency and the right to be wrong and rise again. That reading is real and sustaining for many people. But notice what it requires: it has to read the myth against its own grain, recovering an empowering figure from a story whose plain structure subordinates her. The reclamation is an act of resistance to the text, not a neutral description of it — which is precisely why suspicion is the right first posture, not naivety.

**Bottom line on Sophia.** She can be a powerful symbol — but the version most often sold as ancient feminine liberation is, in its dominant form, a man-authored account of a woman's catastrophic independence and her rescue by a male. Take her if she serves you; just don't accept the packaging as proof that the ‘divine feminine’ on offer was ever designed to set women free.

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## V. Hexes for Content: The Curse Economy

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Festering in the same feed is the part that openly unsettles you — the curse and hex material. Under the hashtag #WitchTok (tens of billions of views), short clips teach spell jars, sigils, and “banishing bad vibes,” and a vocal slice traffics in hexing: hexing public figures, “hexing the patriarchy” as a meme, and, in one widely-mocked episode, novices collectively claiming to hex the moon. The reliable villains of the genre are scripted too — the outraged believer and the smug skeptic — both set up to be silenced by a sassy threat of a curse.

### Why it reads as creepy

**Harm as engagement.** The curse turns malice into shareable content. Whether or not anyone believes it “works,” the performance of wishing harm on a named person, packaged for views, is a genuinely corrosive thing to normalize and to feed to teenagers as entertainment.

**Aesthetic over practice.** Much of it is role-play — cauldron ambiance, cottagecore lighting, a fifteen-second ritual — with no tradition, no study, and no understanding behind it. Even within witchcraft communities, experienced practitioners object to “baby witches” dabbling in curses they don't comprehend.

**Commodification and appropriation.** Scholars studying WitchTok note how thoroughly it is shaped by consumerism — spell ingredients poured from plastic bottles, crystals and “protection” products and personal brands sold alongside the spells — and how often it lifts rituals from closed traditions (Hoodoo, Santería, Indigenous ceremony) stripped of context and consent.

**The fair caveat.** Plenty of practitioners are sincere, find real community, and practice an ethic of restraint — many invoke a threefold-return principle precisely to discourage curses. The critique here is narrow and aimed at the commodified, performative curse-content layer: malice optimized for reach, sold next to a discount code. That is the creepy part, and the flinch at it is the right instinct.

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## VI. The Through-Line

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Set the pieces side by side and one pattern runs through all of them. The temple scribe, the mystery-cult initiator, the church that buried Sophia, the influencer selling ascension, the platform posing as oracle, the brand selling a hex — every one of them inserts itself between a person and their own direct relationship to meaning, and every one of them is sustained by keeping that relationship mediated. The medium changed from scroll to feed. The business model — charge admission to the sacred — did not.

And the antidote is the same one it has always been, which is also why no one is selling it: the un-monetizable practice of **direct, unmediated access** — actually reading the source, actually doing the slow process, actually trusting your own knowing without a gatekeeper, a follower count, or a checkout cart standing in the middle. The reason the spiritual-gangster economy can't sell that is the same reason it's the only thing worth having: the moment you have it, you don't need them.

**The one-line version.** If a teaching's main effect is to make you more dependent on the teacher, the platform, or the purchase, it is the control mechanism wearing the costume of liberation — in a fifteen-second clip telling you how to be free.



## Sources & Further Reading

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Entry points for verification; confirm specifics against original works where precision matters.

### The spiritual-content economy

Spiritual TikTok / credibility by follower count: <https://hashtagpaid.com/banknotes/spiritual-tiktok-content-creators-target-digital-worship-of-all-things>

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“Conspirituality” & the algorithm read as mystical (ACM, 2025): <https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/3757447>

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Spiritual narcissism & “elevation of the self”: <https://siskiyou.sou.edu/2021/01/22/cultivate-your-spiritual-self-during-a-pandemic-say-goodbye-to-tiktok-and-hello-to-cultural-relativism/>

### Sophia: critique and reclamation

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Elaine Pagels, “The Suppressed Gnostic Feminism” (NYRB, 1979): <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1979/11/22/the-suppressed-gnostic-feminism/>

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### WitchTok & the curse economy

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How Modern Witches Enchant TikTok — consumerism & commodification (MDPI, 2022): <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/13/2/118>

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Companion to “The Architecture of Spiritual Control.” Compiled from public, academic, and journalistic sources, June 2026.