

HIDING BEHIND GOD

The root mechanics of spiritual oppression — fear, manufactured unworthiness, and weaponized witchcraft — the culture that spreads it, and a forensic field guide to anyone who claims God sent them

Capstone · third in a series with “The Architecture of Spiritual Control” and “Ascension, Inc.”

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The thesis. Across every religion and none, ancient to now, a recurring move keeps reappearing: people position themselves as God's voice, or as the one you must bow to and confess to, and then use that authority to dominate, frighten, and abuse — disproportionately women and children. It is not one faith's failing. It is a portable exploit in human wiring that anyone hungry for obedience keeps rediscovering. The name for it is oppression, and the costume is holiness.

The boundary. The target of this brief is the abuse-behind-faith pattern — not faith, not belief, and not the millions who practice their religion without harming anyone. Most believers are not abusers, and many traditions carry real liberation. The point is to make the predator's method visible so it can be named regardless of which robe, flag, or hashtag it wears.

Contents

I. The Root: The Two-Tooth Machine

The root cause is not a who. It is a what — a lock that fits the human animal, which is why every would-be owner reaches for the same key. The key has two teeth, and the research behind each is solid even where particular theories are still debated.

Tooth one: installed fear of harm

Humans are the animal that knows it can be hurt and will die, and will pay almost anything to feel safe from that. So the oldest power move in existence is to manufacture a threat only the authority can protect you from. Terror-management research argues that a large share of human behavior is driven by managing the fear of death, and that reminders of mortality push people to cling harder to their worldview and to the authorities that represent it — though, in fairness, several of those laboratory effects have failed to replicate, so it is a strong lead rather than settled fact. At civilization scale, a leading anthropological account (Norenzayan's "Big Gods," Johnson's supernatural-punishment hypothesis) holds that belief in a watching, punishing deity spread partly because, in large anonymous societies, the idea of a god who sees and punishes everything keeps people in line — watched people behave better. The cross-cultural evidence for that is genuinely mixed, so hold it loosely too.

But the cleanest proof is at the individual level. Cult expert Steven Hassan calls it **phobia indoctrination** and considers it the single most powerful technique for keeping people obedient: he has documented people who stopped believing the doctrine years earlier yet still could not walk away, paralyzed by installed fears running below conscious awareness — fear of damnation, demons, ruin, or being cut off. The fear is manufactured, not real, and once it is in, it runs itself. No guard required.

Tooth two: manufactured insufficiency

The second tooth makes you feel like garbage — convinces you that you are inherently flawed, impure, fallen, not-enough. Because if the defect is in you, you need an outside authority to fix it, and you will bow and confess to get fixed. That is precisely why the bowing and the secret-telling matter: bowing trains the body into deference, and confession surrenders the private material that can later shame and bind you. Both transfer your sovereignty to them.

The machine. Install a fear of harm + convince you you're too broken to be safe alone → now you need me → so you bow, confess, obey, and pay → and you experience it as salvation, not capture. The "spiritual bully" is simply whoever is currently working those two levers.

II. Weaponized Witchcraft: Fear of the Supernatural as a Leash

You flagged that witchcraft itself gets used to keep the whole system in order. That instinct is correct, and the documented version is darker and better-evidenced than the WitchTok aesthetic. The occult is wielded as a control instrument in two directions — and both are just the fear lever from Part I, pointed at the powerless.

Direction one: accusation as a weapon

Calling someone a witch has always been a tool of control. The early-modern witch hunts overwhelmingly targeted women, and the practice never ended — it migrated. UNICEF, UNHCR, and the UN human-rights office have documented a modern surge of witchcraft accusations against children and women, especially where charismatic revivalist churches have spread. Accused children have been chained, beaten, starved, had their heads shaved, been subjected to forced “exorcisms,” and abandoned; accused elderly women have been stripped of inheritance, banished, and confined. UNICEF has specifically documented pastors branding children as witches for financial gain, charging families large fees to “exorcise” the spirits. Scholars studying asylum claims classify witchcraft-related violence as a form of gendered persecution. The accusation is the weapon; fear of the supernatural is the ammunition; and it lands on exactly who you said — women and children.

Direction two: the curse as a threat

The flip side is threatening people with supernatural harm to keep them obedient — “you’ll be cursed, possessed, damned, or destroyed if you leave or question.” This is phobia indoctrination in its rawest form, and it operates inside families and high-control groups worldwide. It is the same fear, whether the authority claims to protect you from the curse or threatens to call it down on you.

The unifying point. Whether the supernatural is used to accuse you or to threaten you, the mechanism is identical: manufacture a spiritual danger, then position yourself as the only protection from it. “Witchcraft used to enslave” is, at root, fear of the unseen turned into a leash — and the cruelest versions are pointed at the people least able to push back.

III. The Amplifier: Media and the Culture of Spiritual Unhealthiness

None of this stays in temples anymore. The content economy is the amplifier — it takes the oldest manipulations and distributes them at planetary scale, laundered through people who look like friends.

- **Authority by metrics.** Audiences routinely grant spiritual and moral credibility on follower count alone, no training or accountability required — making moral authorities out of people whose only credential is engagement.
- **The algorithm as oracle.** Researchers studying “conspirituality” find users reading the recommendation engine as mystical fate — “whoever needs to see it will see it” — which reframes an engagement-optimization machine as cosmic delivery, and makes its outputs feel divinely sanctioned.
- **Misinformation with a halo.** “Conspirituality” is the documented blend of New-Age spirituality and conspiracy theory; wrapping false claims in spiritual language lowers a person’s guard, because doubting the claim feels like doubting the sacred.
- **Unhealthiness sold as wellness.** A trillion-dollar wellness market blends genuine teaching with self-promotion until the line vanishes, manufacturing dependency — people trained to reach outward to a charismatic source for what they’re told is inner wisdom.

The net effect: the same two-tooth machine, but now A/B-tested for clicks and pointed at billions, skewing young. The medium doesn't invent the manipulation — it scales it, and it dresses the bully as a wellness creator.

IV. A Forensics of the Divine Mandate

You asked for a forensic lens on people who claim “God sent me” or “I'm on a mission from God.” The good news: it already exists. The undue-influence and coercive-control field — Lifton's totalism criteria, Hassan's BITE model, the coercive-control framework — has been built precisely to evaluate this, and is increasingly used as forensic evidence. A divine-mandate claim is not automatically abusive; what matters is whether the claim is being used to seize control. Here is the working checklist.

1. **Private, unfalsifiable channel.** Does the person claim a direct line to God that no one else can check, and does that channel conveniently deliver instructions that increase their authority? Unverifiable revelation that always favors the revealer is the first red flag.
2. **Manufactured sin.** Are the people around them told they are uniquely sinful, broken, or impure — and that only this person's program can fix them?
3. **Installed fear.** Is leaving, doubting, or disobeying tied to catastrophe — damnation, demons, ruin, the “evil world” outside?
4. **Isolation.** Are followers being separated from spouses, family, and outside friends — the supports that could reality-test the leader?
5. **Demanded submission and confession.** Must followers obey without question and surrender their private secrets, which are then used to bind or shame them?
6. **Money and benefit.** Does the divine mission route money, labor, or status to the leader? Follow it.
7. **Harm reframed as love.** Is cruelty — especially toward children — justified as discipline, purification, or “for their own good”?

The single sharpest tell. A genuine spiritual teacher tends to hand you back to yourself — calmer, less afraid, more able to stand alone. The predator does the opposite: more dependent, more afraid, more certain you cannot survive without them. Direction of travel is the diagnosis.

V. Case File: Utah — Franke and Hildebrandt

The 2023–24 Utah case is almost a laboratory specimen of the framework above, which is why it's worth walking through. Ruby Franke ran the parenting channel *8 Passengers*; Jodi Hildebrandt ran a counseling business, *ConneXions*; the two met through their church community and built a following coaching parents on raising children in “truth.” Both pleaded guilty to four counts each of second-degree aggravated child abuse and were sentenced in February 2024 to four-to-thirty years. Run it against the checklist:

Private channel: the prosecution stated that Hildebrandt regularly claimed God communicated directly with her and gave her directions, and that Franke accepted her as leader and followed her guidance — unverifiable revelation that delivered authority.

Manufactured sin and installed fear: investigators and Franke's own journal describe the children being cast as sinful and possessed — abuse framed as teaching them to repent for imagined “sins” and to drive out “evil spirits.” Franke wrote that she would not feed “a demon,” reframing starvation as “fasting.” Franke later said she had been led to believe the world is an evil place.

Isolation: Hildebrandt encouraged Franke to push away her brother, sisters, parents, friends, and finally her husband and children; Kevin Franke described being ordered out of his own home and made to seek Hildebrandt's approval to return.

Money and benefit: Franke acknowledged paying Hildebrandt as her mentor; a later federal suit alleged the pair sold a methodology that encouraged child abuse.

Harm reframed as love: the documented abuse — restraint, denial of food and water, forced labor in extreme heat, isolation — was presented to the children as discipline they deserved, to the point that, per investigators, the children came to believe they deserved it. The prosecutor called it, plainly, a case about religious extremism.

The crucial fairness point. This is not an indictment of a faith — and that's exactly why it proves your thesis. Reporting noted that the women's beliefs in key respects departed from mainstream Latter-day Saint teaching (their fiery-hell framing conflicts with the church's doctrine). In other words, two individuals weaponized religious authority and language to justify abuse. Strip the specific denomination and the structure is identical to abuse hidden behind any faith. That is the whole point: the danger isn't the religion; it's the method that hides inside it.

VI. The Verdict: It's Oppression, in Every Faith

Set every piece beside the others — the fear lever, the manufactured unworthiness, the weaponized curse and accusation, the content machine, the divine-mandate predator, the Utah case — and one structure runs through all of them. Someone inserts themselves between a person and their own relationship to meaning, manufactures a danger and a deficit, and charges admission to the cure. The denomination is interchangeable. The method is constant. That's why you're right to say you don't care which religion: naming a single culprit misses that it's a repeatable exploit, not a tribe.

And the antidote is the one thing none of them can sell, which is why none of them offer it: **direct, unmediated access** — your own knowing, your own worth, your own relationship to whatever you hold sacred, with no gatekeeper, no installed fear, and no checkout cart standing in the middle. The moment a person has that, the bully has nothing left to threaten them with.

The one-line test for all of it. If a teaching makes you more afraid and more dependent and more convinced you're broken, it's oppression in a costume — no matter who it claims sent it. If it leaves you less afraid and more your own, it isn't.

Sources & Further Reading

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Third in the series, with “The Architecture of Spiritual Control” and “Ascension, Inc.” Compiled from public, academic, journalistic, and court sources, June 2026. The Utah case is summarized from public court records and reporting.