Wednesday, Aug. 28, 2024 / Minion Jesus

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

SCORING <Minion “Bananas”>

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): Minions are inescapable at this point. The movies have made over five billion dollars! You can go to Minionland in Orlando. You can decorate your house with Christmas Minions in December. You can buy Minion chicken nuggets at the grocery store.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: And lately, there’s been a very strange, but ubiquitous Minion meme on TikTok.

LAURA BULLARD (senior researcher): There's a content creator who's sitting in front of a green screen. On the green screen is an image of a Minion who is crucified. It's a Minion crucifixion scene. And the TikToker starts the video by saying:

*<CLIP> TIKTOK: One day an animator was messing around and he created this picture of a little minion who was nailed to a cross… <duck under>*

LAURA: And so like the gist of the video is basically like: This Minion didn't die on the cross for you, but someone did.

*<CLIP> TIKTOK: <duck up> Jesus actually died for you and took the punishment that you and I deserve. And why? <duck under>*

LAURA: And it turns out a lot of creators are making, like, variations of this exact same video. Like it almost feels scripted in a way that's, like, weird for TikTok. <inhales> I was like, I should figure it out. I should try and figure this out.  
  
 SCORING <Minion “Bananas”>

SEAN: *Today, Explained*’s senior researcher, Laura Bullard, is gonna tell us how a minion meme she caught on TikTok connects to the 2024 election.

[THEME]

*<CLIP> MINION MEME MONTAGE*

SEAN: *Today, Explained*. Laura B., you see a strange Minion meme on TikTok. A minion on a cross. People talking about how to become a Christian. And you see that whole Tiktok being recreated, verbatim, over and over again. And you wanna know what’s going on. Where do you start?

LAURA: The place I started was with the image – which, again, minion crucifixion – and I noticed that in the bottom left corner of the image, there's like an artist signature. So I just found that guy, on Facebook, incidentally, and I called him up.

*<CLIP> ANIMATOR AMERICO CRUZ: Well, some day I was just messing around. …*

LAURA: His name is Americo Cruz.

SCORING <Old Technology Has My Heart>

*<CLIP> CRUZ: I am 26 year(s) old. And I am a graphic design student. I live in Saltillo, Coahuila, Mexico.*

LAURA: Americo told me he had actually just learned about these videos. But he had created this image back in 2021. I asked him what compelled him to make such a bizarre image.

*<CLIP> CRUZ: I honestly don't remember having a specific reason or motive to do it. The idea just came to my mind, and I say, ‘Hey, I think it would be fun to create this illustration.’ And I took some inspiration from old memes, like the photograph of Buzz Lightyear being crucified. In the end of – of the day, it’s just part of the absurd humor that we have in Gen Z.*

LAURA: So Americo sort of helped us understand where this image came from. But this did not explain why I kept seeing videos with the same or very similar scripts over and over again. So I changed gears …  
  
 SCORING OUT ABRUPTLY  
  
LAURA … and I turned to the actual content of the video: Who were these people? How do they know each other? Are they friends? Are they working together towards a specific goal? A couple of other publications have tried to solve this mystery. And they all sort of point back to the earliest known version of this video:

*<CLIP> PASTOR JOSH PAN, TIKTOK: So there was this animator, right? And he was messing around one day when he suddenly created a minion who died on the cross…*

LAURA: The thought was that other Christian influencers sort of saw how well this was doing, and they followed suit, more or less organically. Just like, pulling the image, pulling the script.

*<CLIP> TIKTOK COPYCAT: So there was this animator, right? And he was messing around one day when he suddenly created a minion who had died on the cross.*

LAURA: This didn't sound quite right to me, because that’s not really how like TikTok – how things, like, move on TikTok. So I started combing through these social media accounts. And I realized there seemed to be one man that all of these people were following.

SEAN: Jesus?

LAURA: <chuckles> Yes, but outside of that. Because this would be *on* social media.

SEAN: <giggles>

LAURA: Yeah. Including the original poster, all of these accounts were connected back to one man. And his name is Taylan Michael Seaman.

*<CLIP> TAYLAN MICHAEL SEAMAN: Welcome back to Ruston Louisiana, I’m your host, evangelist Taylan Michael. If you would, let me know where you’re watchin’ from all over the world… <duck>*

LAURA: So he's this guy in his late 20s. He's blond. He's kind of buff. And he is an evangelist and a self-proclaimed millionaire.

SEAN: <chortles>

*<CLIP> SEAMAN: What I’m going to do today is brag on what God has done in my life, that took me from, three years ago, having negative $233 in my bank account to having a business that’s worth – valued at just over $4 million dollars, a ministry that’s valued at just about a million dollars… <fade under>*

LAURA: He started this movement that he calls the Viral Revival, which has, like, “Rural Juror” vibes.

SEAN: <laughs> It does!

LAURA: So you have to, like, say it slow. So a part of this is this coaching ministry that is called Kingdom University. And it's where he and, like, a handful of other dudes teach would-be evangelists how to make viral videos. Um, some of them do include minions.

SEAN: Have you seen what his classes are like? Are they on YouTube or do you have to pay for them?

LAURA: I mean, I tried to sign up, Sean. Ok, so, I…

SEAN: Oh!

LAURA: Basically what they send you when you sign up, it's like, your first training video. So I was like, I'm in.

*<CLIP> TRAINING VIDEO: Hi. Welcome. If you’re watching this right now, my name is Taylan, and you wanna learn how to leave your 9-5 job to preach the gospel full-time, online. Welcome to the party… <duck>*

LAURA: I watched it, and at the end of it, I realized the rest of the course is paywalled. They do note that this was for my own good.

*<CLIP> TRAINING VIDEO: <duck up> But I want you to know one thing: There is a financial investment. So this isn't free because people who don't pay, don't pay attention…*

SEAN: And so then what did you do?

LAURA: Well, I was interested, actually, in paying for the class, but I found out that they actually, they screen the people like before they decide who they're willing to allow. Basically they screen for people who are like, actually content creators who want to be evangelizing. So they – they wouldn't present their course to me until I prove to them that I was, like, worthy. I didn't want to deceive them as to who I was. So I showed up to the first sales call, and I told them that I was a journalist. And so from there, they weren't really willing to, like, offer much more information.

SEAN: Does getting rejected from this class get you any closer to connecting the dots on this compelling image of a minion on a crucifix and what the people were saying in the videos that you saw on TikTok?

LAURA: Sort of. Like, he kind of told me how the business works and like, what the coaches do. And he would not confirm or deny the Minion detail specifically, but thankfully, I was in touch with a couple TikTokers – the people who did the original Minion Jesus videos – and they were willing to confirm that this is content that was sort of flagged to them by their coaches.

SEAN: Hm.

LAURA: Yeah. So the way the program works, it's basically like: They are making content based on this sort of, like, marketing framework presented to them, and then the coaches are also making content. And if somebody makes something that is particularly successful, the coaches will then, like, tell that information to all the followers.

SEAN: Ok.

LAURA: And then they all make versions of the video, which is how this bizarre and sort of like, eerie phenomenon happens. There's only like one main thing that they sort of all have in common, and it's this final call to action where they point you towards another video that is usually a little bit longer. And it's always a lot more earnest. And it's… more intimate, like the creator will share about their spiritual practice. And then it sort of teaches you how to become a Christian, basically. So the end goal of each video is to save you, the viewer, from hell.

*<CLIP> TIKTOK: Jesus is real. If you know that it is time to let Jesus into your life, then pray this prayer with me: Say, ‘Jesus, I am sorry for living a life of sin apart from you. I realize now…’*

LAURA: There is also, like, a very clear interest in, like, making a lot of money. The courses are expensive. That's like one way they're making money. They say they have like 800 people enrolled. So that means, like, without factoring in any, like, discounts, over the past couple of years, he's cleared anywhere from $1.6 to $7.2 million.   
  
SEAN: Hm.   
  
LAURA: And there are very few people involved, like in a coaching sense. So it’s like, actually… It's a lot of money to be making off of, like, Minion Jesus content.

SEAN: <laughs> So okay, so there's a bunch of – minions – you could say…

LAURA: Mm-hmm.

SEAN: …doing the work out there on TikTok. Then you got this guy Taylan above them, getting paid way more, training, doing organizing. Is he at the top of the pyramid or, or does it go higher than that?

LAURA: So technically, his ministry is connected in a couple different ways to his church, where his father in law is the pastor. And this church seems to be either a part of or, like, extremely adjacent to something that is called the New Apostolic Reformation.

SCORING <Refractive Angles>

LAURA: It's a loose collection of nondenominational churches. They're connected by, like, people doing speaker circuits. And a few key similarities. They're quasi-Pentecostal. So you're gonna hear, like, a lot of speaking in tongues. You're going to see faith healing. And there is also this, an undeniable emphasis on wealth.

*<CLIP> SEAMAN: There’s an old saying that says we sow up – for the blessing to come down. When you serve a minister, or a ministry, or you bless them financially, you actually reap a harvest of the grace that’s on that ministry. So if you believe you’re called to be an evangelist, I encourage you tonight: sow the biggest financial seed you’ve ever sown.*

LAURA: And so this means that, like, movements like the New Apostolic Reformation and programs like Kingdom University, they tend to be, like, really split in terms of, like, how the power is distributed. There's going to be a few people at the top who are profiting immediately, like, cash in hand. And then there's going to be a lot more people who are sort of handing over that cash in the hopes that, like, God will make good on that investment, which is, like, a, an act of faith.

SEAN: Mm.

LAURA: So that means that this really does work for some people, like the Taylans of the world.

And there are super successful versions of Taylan actually all over the country. They're making a lot of money. And with that money comes a lot of influence. And I mean spiritual influence. It means social influence. And, sometimes it can mean political influence.

SCORING SWITCHES TO <Amphibious Blustery Flapdoodle>

SEAN: Laura Bullard. She’s our senior researcher. She reached out to Taylan Micahel Seamen to find out more about his work, but he never got back to her.

How this minion meme connects to the Republican candidate for president, when we return on *Today, Explained*.

[BREAK]

*<CLIP> MINION GREGORIAN CHANT: ToooOOOooooOOOOoooOOoday, Explained.   
 MINION: Banana.*

SEAN: Alright. So there are Minion crucifixion memes on TikTok. Laura finds out they lead up to this guy Taylan Michael Seaman, who’s trying to make a lotta money and gain power and influence and followers in the process. Andy Kroll, who covers fringe religious movements in America for ProPublica, says there are Taylans all over the place.

ANDY KROLL (ProPublica reporter): Oh yeah. There's more Taylans out there, and there's more Taylans out there than ever before. The segment of Christianity that we're talking about: It's not the largest part of Christianity. It’s not the largest by number, but it's the fastest-growing. It's where all the energy is. It's where all of the virality is, and it's where a lot of the political connections are in a way that just wasn't true before the last ten years or so. So yeah. When I, when I go online and I look up Minion Jesus, and when I read about Taylan, I see a… almost like an archetype …

SCORING <Loopbox Amber>

ANDY: … someone who is common throughout this wild west of Christianity. Someone who's really thinking about how to break through on whatever the latest communication platform is, whatever the latest medium is. And in this case, you know, I think we're talking about like TikTok and we're talking about Instagram, talking about Twitter – X, whatever we're supposed to call it now – he is the face of this kind of thing, but he is not alone in this at all.

SEAN: You know, This guy Taylan Michael Seaman, you know, he's connected to this group called the New Apostolic Reformation. What do you know about that group?

ANDY: The New Apostolic Reformation is one of the most fascinating and troubling parts of American Christianity today. It is politically connected. It is very dramatic in how it talks about the role of the Church, and the role of Christianity. I mean, the best way to think about it is: it's a subculture of a subculture in Christianity. They are not part of some larger, organized denomination. There is not any kind of set of ideas or rules or guidelines from above that connects all of these people. It's a very sort of loose federation, almost, of conservative Christians. The New Apostolic Reformation is premised on this idea that the Church has to be present in every part of its people's lives, and even more, that the American Christian faith is headed toward this new reformation, this new revival in which the church sort of shakes itself out of this sleepy, you know, passive stance and becomes the dominant force in all of American life, not just on Sunday.

SEAN: Hm.

ANDY: But that this is very much a sort of a fight for the future of the world waged by the people who believe in this larger NAR movement.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: And who are the people? It sounds like you're talking about stuff now that is above Taylan's pay grade.

ANDY: I think the guy to really zero in on if you want to understand the NAR, and if you want to understand this really fast-growing part of American Christianity, is a fellow named Lance Wallnau.

*<CLIP> EVANGELIST LANCE WALLNAU: Don’t touch that dial, this is gonna be one of the most interesting Bible Studies you’ve been in a long time.*

SCORING <Glass House>

ANDY: Wallnau is based out of Texas. He is not exactly a preacher. He's not exactly a pastor. He doesn't lead a church or have people who come to him on Sunday to hear him talk. He's something much bigger than that: He – he's an influencer. And Wallnau has millions of followers online who watch him through Facebook, through YouTube, through Twitter.

SEAN: Hm!

*<CLIP> WALLNAU: I went to hear Donald Trump in 2015…   
INTERVIEWER: Uh-huh.   
WALLNAU: …and when I came home, I distinctly heard – and I’m not one of those people who’s always hearing God’s voice, so it stuck out to me – I heard the Lord say, ‘Isaiah 45 will be the 45th president.’   
INTERVIEWER: Wow.*

ANDY: Lance Wallnau is one of the first Christian influencers, first Christian leaders with a sizable audience to say, ‘actually, I think Donald Trump is the guy.’ Wallnau comes up with this idea that Trump is a modern-day Cyrus. What that means is that he is a… a flawed but virtuous leader – you know, going back to the Bible here – who will lead people to salvation.

*<CLIP> WALLNAU: But then I read on in this 45th chapter, and it says, Isaiah says, ‘Though you have not known me, I have anointed you for Israel’s sake’.   
INTERVIEWER: Mhmm.   
WALLNAU: And when I saw that “though you have not known me”, I circled it and I said, ‘My God, this is crazy theology. God’s bringing in a heathen ruler with his anointing who doesn’t yet know him// From that moment on, I said, that guy’s gonna go the distance. He’ll beat all 15. He’ll go all the way to the White House.*

ANDY: And by the time Trump wins in November of ‘16, “modern-day Cyrus” is second hand among conservative Christians, and Lance Wallnau has seen his stock rise incredibly.   
  
SEAN: Hm.   
  
ANDY: And people believe him, and they start to see Lance Wallnau as a prophet.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: What does Wallnau want? What is he preaching?

ANDY: Lance Wallnau’s big idea is something called the Seven Mountain Mandate.

*<CLIP> WALLNAU: I want to talk to you for a moment about this concept called the Seven-M Mandate. In reality, it started with a conversation I had in the year 2000.*

ANDY: He has a conversation, what he later says is this sort of aha moment for him, this, this, this divine revelation, truly, where he's talking with some peers in this world and they come to him with this idea that there are seven key pillars of American society, or seven key spheres of influence, that that basically decide what a culture looks like.

SEAN: Hm.

ANDY: Those are: arts and media, business, religion, family, church, government, science and technology.

*<CLIP> WALLNAU: Now, these seven fields of influence are very powerful. So powerful, in fact, that he who occupies the top of those mountains can literally shape the agenda that, that forms nations.*

ANDY: And in this case, they talk about taking dominion of the seven mountains.

*<CLIP> WALLNAU: Because God has a way of getting into positions, companies, businesses, nations, and communities before the devil even knows what got in there. Because the gospel is bigger than just the church mountain. It's the gospel that covers the whole earth.*

ANDY: Taking dominion, and this, this thing called the Dominion theology is really central to what Lance Wallnau wants, what he hopes to accomplish. Basically, for the last 20 years, the Seven Mountains mandate has been Lance Wallnau’s calling card. This has been his viral idea that he has been spreading as widely as possible. And some 20% of Americans have not only heard of the Seven Mountains, but they either agree or strongly agree with it. And that's pretty impressive when you talk about reaching a big audience.

SEAN: What is the Seven Mountains vision for this country?

ANDY: I mean, the Seven Mountains mandate would be a radical reordering of almost every part of how American life currently functions. That sounds like a dramatic statement. It is a dramatic statement, but it's also true. Through our reporting, we have all the documents. We've watched all the videos where they talk exactly about how the Seven Mountains mandate actually becomes real. Public education is destroyed, dismantled, taken apart, replaced by religious education. Homeschooling is a human right. And so homeschooling becomes far more part of the education system. You have a government that is run and shaped through a biblical worldview. Now what does that actually mean? We think about it. It means that obviously reproductive rights are a thing of the past. Same sex marriage is a thing of the past. I think that it spells trouble for other faiths that aren't part of the broader Christian umbrella period. I think the basic idea of pluralism is chucked out the window when you are talking about the Seven Mountains mandate becoming reality, and every part of our American government education, health care, entertainment, science, technology flowing through this, this particular ideology. Yeah. It's a country that's, that's pretty much unrecognizable if it were ever, you know, sort of fully put into motion. That's what these people want. That's what this movement seeks. Obviously, there's, there's quite a lot of distance between where we are now and, and what they're hoping for.

SEAN: Andy, you know, we started this episode talking about a Minion Jesus meme, and we've somehow ended up at…

ANDY: <laughs>

SEAN: …the potential reshaping of our country into some Christian nationalist state?

ANDY: I mean, <mouth noises> things have gotten weird, but I'm not the first person to say that.

<Sean and Andy laugh>

ANDY: I mean, it's such a clear example of the way online culture is culture now, and the fact that the line from Minion Jesus to this pretty radical, disturbing plan to change every part of American life, that line is very clear.

SCORING <A Slow Swirl to Safety>

ANDY: The way in which these worlds have kind of swirled together kind of blows my mind and also kind of makes me think that this is the future of the Republican Party. You know, if Trump – when Trump – exits the stage, this is where the energy is, this sort of swirling of Christian memes and New Apostolic Reformation leaders and Republican politicians. Trump may, you know, bid us adieu, whenever that is. But, Lance Wallnau’s not going anywhere. And Taylan’s not going anywhere and these ideas, far from not going anywhere, they're just getting more attention, getting more traction.

SCORING BUMP

SEAN: Andy Kroll, at ProPublica dot org.

Aminion Lewellyn produced the show with all kinds of help from Laura Bullard. Matthew Collette edited. Patrick Boyd and Andrea Kritinsdottir mixed.

I’m Sean Raminionswaram? This is *Today, Explained*.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]