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Adam, Eve, and the Ku Klux Klan: What Genesis Can Teach Us About Extremists

Rishab Chatty

Abstract

The story of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3 is often attributed to the downfall of humanity, the beginning of all sin and imperfection. It is a story of Adam and Eve's disobedience of the supreme authority, the Lord God, serving as a reminder that God is synonymous with perfection and to be human is to be imperfect. However, it also brings to light a contentious argument in both theology and philosophy: whether or not and to what extent we have free will. This argument is equally prevalent in discussing extremist organizations' ability to recruit new members in the United States. My paper will explore how extremist organizations use propaganda and misinformation to attract people and the role of manipulation in this process. I will compare the story of Eve and the Serpent to the experiences of people who have subscribed to extremist belief systems and explain why we should shift more blame from participants in extremist organizations to those responsible for manipulating them. Through interviews with former extremists, this paper discerns that their decisions to join such organizations were manipulated much in the same way as the serpent tempted Eve.

Keywords: Extremism, Manipulation, Theology, Misinformation, Free Will

Manipulation in the Bible

Many Christians today maintain their belief that Eve intentionally chose to defy the word of God, giving her the free will to make choices and thus establishing the premise of sin. Genesis 3:6 states that "When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it." This alludes to the notion that Eve purposefully disobeyed her Creator and ate the apple on the basis that it looked visually and physically appealing.

The story isn't as simple as this, though -- to understand what exactly prompted her to consume the apple, we must dissect what happened immediately before and understand the context behind her decision:

> *Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God really say, `You must not eat from any tree in the garden'?" The woman said to the serpent, "We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, `You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'" "You will not surely die," the serpent said to the woman. "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."*[1]

- Genesis 3:1-5

Here we can see that Eve understood that God had prohibited her from eating the apple and was reluctant to do so. The words of the serpent, however, seemed to influence her -- the serpent fed her the illusion that God was attempting to manipulate her, trying to

[1]" Genesis 3," Bible gateway Genesis 3 :: NIV, accessed July 30, 2021, http://web.mit.edu/jywang/www/cef/Bible/NIV/NIV_Bible/GEN+3.html.

convince Eve that God was trying to maintain His power over her by restricting and disallowing her from attaining the same level of wisdom He held. To blame Eve is to delegitimize the consequences of manipulation on one's power to maintain their free will.

Opponents of this manipulation theory may cite God's ultimate benevolence, claiming that as the Creator had only good intention, that Eve should have known not to trust the Serpent or that she should have known that the snake was actually Satan. By choosing to trust the Serpent over the word of God, Eve would then have opted to reject the good that our Creator represents, instead exposing the inherent evil many Christians believe humans possess.

This may be a bit misleading, however -- nowhere in Genesis 2 or before Eve chooses to eat the fruit in Genesis 3, is it made clear to Eve that God has purely good intentions or that the Serpent is Satan in animal form. In fact, there's no evidence showing that she knows what God is, other than her referring to Him with that title in correspondence with the Serpent. The only reason that we, as a third party to the story, know any of this is due to hindsight bias.

> *And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil, and Satan, which deceiveth the whole world: he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him.*[2]

- Revelation 12:9

[2] Bible, King James Version, accessed July 30, 2021, https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/k/kjv/kjv-idx?type=DIV1&byte=5379618.

And he laid hold on the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil, and Satan, and bound him a thousand years.[3]

- Revelation 20:2

Christians or religious scholars who have read the Bible in its entirety or those who know of Satan's serpentine form through pop culture references will be biased in their opinion of Eve's actions, believing that she purposefully rejected God in favor of Satan. To Eve, however, God is but a being with extraordinary powers who she naively trusts at first, not knowing his inherent identity or true intentions. When exposed to the words of the Serpent, she likely had no idea of its intentions as well, believing not that she was forced to choose between the words of God and Satan but rather just two beings, neither of which she had known well enough. Thus, the issue is not a question of free will but that of her being manipulated by the ideas propagated by a being we can infer she knew for a shorter period.

Manipulation and Extremist Organizations

A common misconception of members of extremist organizations is that they generally join such groups out of hate-filled ideology. Interviews with former members and research studies show however that many of them did not initially harbor distaste for particular demographics but were instead pulled in by hot button issues.[4]

Hate groups and organizations propagating extremist philosophies will often target towns hit hard by economic recessions or unemployment or will leverage dividing talking

[3] ibid^

[4] Interview with Jeff Schoep (former leader of the National Socialist Movement), January 2021.

points such as abortion and immigration, offering constituents fraternity or membership in an organization that will fight for their cause. The Ku Klux Klan, in fact, offered Protestant ministers free membership and positions of power within their group if they joined.[5]

This is a strategic move, as the typical violent extremist is profiled as "young, unemployed and struggling to make ends meet, relatively uneducated, and not as religious as others, but more willing to sacrifice own life for his or her beliefs." Extremist organizations prey upon this relative deprivation and feelings of hopelessness and inadequacy, offering an escape and cause to fight for.[6] Once they have recruited their new members, the organizations begin feeding them propaganda and disinformation to fuel and promote hate against particular demographics or ideologies.

Hate and extremist groups often rely on disinformation campaigns as well, either after having exerted their influence over recruits or as part of their initial recruitment strategy. These efforts are facilitated in part by social media and its algorithms. In fact, a 2016 presentation by Facebook research scientist Monica Lee claimed that "64% of all extremist group joins are due to [their] recommendation tools."[7] Another internal report presented to Facebook executives in 2018 stated "Our algorithms exploit the human brain's attraction to divisiveness," indicating that Facebook has been self-aware of the threat they pose in advancing extremist behavior, polarization and radicalization.[8]

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[5] Chester L. Quarles, The Ku Klux Klan and Related American Racialist and ANTISEMITIC Organizations: A History and Analysis (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2008).
[6] Youssouf Kiendrebeogo and Elena Ianchovichina, "PDF," June 2016.
[7] Jeff Horwitz and Deepa Seetharaman, "Facebook Executives Shut down Efforts to Make the Site Less Divisive," The Wall Street Journal (Dow Jones & Company, May 26, 2020), https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-knows-it-encourages-division-top-executives-nixed-solutions-11590507499
[8] Nick Statt, "Facebook Reportedly Ignored Its Own Research Showing Algorithms Divided Users," The Verge (The Verge, May 26, 2020), https://www.theverge.com/2020/5/26/21270659/facebook-division-news-feed-algorithms.

Algorithms on similar platforms such as Tiktok and Youtube have also contributed to a rise in extremism, feeding into what's been termed the "far-right pipeline". Similar to Facebook's personalization, Tiktok's "For You Page" has allowed, and to some extent even encouraged, users to engage with increasingly extreme content.[9] YouTube has very similar features, providing users with suggestions for content based on their initial consumption, oftentimes driving them deeper and deeper down the rabbit hole.

This becomes dangerous because of the amount of misinformation and disinformation present on the web. A Pew Research study found that 52% of Americans have admitted to sharing "made up" news.[10] That is especially concerning considering that only 17% of Americans understand how to accurately detect fake news.

This disinformation is key in driving extremist narratives. Narratives claiming that the coronavirus aimed to destroy white people and was created by Jewish people, for example, drove Timothy Wilson, a resident of New Jersey, to plan and nearly execute an attempt to detonate an explosive device at a hospital treating COVID patients.[11]

Now, having seen the impact of disinformation and manipulation on the membership and activity of extremist organizations, the free will versus manipulation argument comes to light once more. Though we ostracize those who participate in such hate groups, little is ever done to hold leaders within those groups accountable for their

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[9] Cameron Hickey, "TikTok Played a Key Role in MAGA Radicalization," Wired (Conde Nast, March 3, 2021), https://www.wired.com/story/opinion-tiktok-played-a-key-role-in-maga-radicalization/.

[10] Jeffrey Gottfried Amy Mitchell, "Many Americans SAY Made-up News Is a Critical Problem That Needs to Be Fixed," Pew Research Center's Journalism Project, August 17, 2020, https://www.journalism.org/2019/06/05/many-americans-say-made-up-news-is-a-critical-problem-that-needs-to-be-fixed/.

[11] "Disinformation Fuels Extremist Narratives," njhomelandsecurity.gov, accessed July 30, 2021, https://www.njhomelandsecurity.gov/analysis/disinformation-fuels-extremist-narratives.

actions. After all, they arguably bear more responsibility for the actions of violent extremists than those individuals themselves. David Duke, the former Grand Wizard of the KKK, inspired a new movement of white supremacy and anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States, despite claiming to despise the violent methods of the group.[12] Even then, he was allowed to serve in the Louisiana House of Representatives and run for multiple presidential campaigns. Punishing individuals when their leaders are given such prominent platforms is not only counterintuitive but presents a grave danger to the security of our nation.

Like Eve, many of those susceptible to extremism face a distorted reality — one which they are not responsible for creating but one that they are nevertheless held accountable for. While this still does not acquit those who utilize violence as a means to achieve the objective they were manipulated into believing in, it still provides a necessary context to fairly judge just how accountable they are for their own actions. It's time we turn our gaze towards the Serpent and vilify its modern counterparts in our society.

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