

*Mimetic Theory & The Lucifer Effect: Scapegoating and the Call to Repair*¹

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A collaborative talk connecting Girard's mimetic desire and scapegoating to atonement theology and to what social psychology reveals about roles, power, and situational pressure—ending with practical reflection on accountability, compassion, and repair for communities of faith.

René Girard's Mimetic Theory

RENÉ GIRARD'S MIMETIC THEORY offers a simple but unsettling claim: *human desire is imitative*. We often learn what to want by watching what others want, and this imitation can quietly generate rivalry, contagion, and eventually scapegoating [Girard, 1989, 2001]. The goal is not to reduce every conflict to a single template; it is to sharpen our perception of a pattern that repeats across communities, politics, and even religious life.

Girard in one sentence

We desire through imitation—and when shared desire escalates into rivalry and crisis, communities often restore unity by converging on a scapegoat [Girard, 1989].

From desire to scapegoat: the basic structure

Girard's account can be summarized as a recurring sequence:

1. **Mimesis (mirroring):** desire is learned socially; we imitate what is valued (status, belonging, security, moral certainty).
2. **Rivalry:** the model becomes the obstacle; comparison intensifies and conflict grows.
3. **Contagion:** conflict spreads through the group; emotions mirror; positions harden; complexity collapses.
4. **Crisis:** instability rises; anxiety becomes diffuse; the group longs for resolution.

5. **Scapegoat:** the group converges on a person or marginal subgroup and treats them as the “cause” of many problems—restoring a temporary sense of unity through exclusion [Girard, 1989].

What it feels like from the inside

From within the process, mimetic escalation rarely feels like imitation. It feels like **righteousness, urgency, and clarity**: “someone must be stopped,” “something must be defended,” “we finally see what’s really happening.” This is part of the mechanism’s power—participants often experience it as moral necessity rather than social contagion [Girard, 2001].

The theological turn: myth vs. Gospel

Girard argues that many myths justify collective violence by portraying the victim as guilty and the crowd as right. By contrast, the Gospels expose the innocence of the victim and unmask scapegoating as a human mechanism [Girard, 2001]. In this framing, the cross is not about God *requiring* violence; it is about God *revealing* and interrupting human violence—opening a path toward forgiveness, truth-telling, and repair.

Implications for faith communities

Faith communities are not immune. Under threat or destabilization, communities can tighten identity boundaries and “solve” anxiety by locating a problem person or problem group. The invitation of mimetic theory is not suspicion of everyone else; it is **self-examination**: Where are we mirroring fear? Where are we collapsing complexity into a target? Where are we confusing exclusion with unity?

Bridge question

Girard helps us see how scapegoats emerge. The next question is behavioral and situational: **How do ordinary people get recruited into participating in the harm?** That is where Zimbardo’s “Lucifer Effect” becomes a complementary lens.

The Lucifer Effect

PHILIP ZIMBARDO’S “LUCIFER EFFECT” describes how ordinary people can be pulled into harmful actions when roles are strong,

authority is legitimized, group norms intensify, and responsibility diffuses [Zimbardo, 2007, 2004]. The aim here is not cynicism or finger-pointing; it is clarity. When we can name these pressures, we can design counterweights—personal, communal, and institutional practices that make compassion, accountability, and repair more likely under strain.

Why this matters for communities of faith

Communities of faith are not only places of refuge; they are moral actors in a wider social environment. Under threat or stress, any community—including churches—can drift into scapegoating, silence, and moral outsourcing. Discipleship is the practice of resisting that drift: refusing dehumanizing language, resisting diffusion of responsibility, and taking concrete steps of public witness when neighbors are vulnerable.

A guiding arc: solidarity under pressure

A hopeful intuition is that the unity of oppressed people can be a source of strength. Social psychology adds a sober note: solidarity is not automatic. Under escalating pressure and punishment, groups often fragment, comply, or withdraw. This is not a character indictment—it is a human vulnerability shaped by situation. Faith communities can respond by building counterweights that protect truth-telling, protect the vulnerable, and concentrate responsibility.

Four mechanisms that recruit participation in harm

Mechanism 1: Roles & labels

What it is. A *role* is a socially defined “job” in a situation (leader, insider, guard, prisoner) with expectations attached to it; a *label* is the shortcut we use to categorize a person by that role or identity. Together, roles and labels can turn personal choices into “just doing my duty,” and can turn a person into a type rather than a full human being [Zimbardo, 2007, 2004].

- **On the side of power:** roles can provide permission (“this is necessary”) and emotional distance (“this isn’t me—it’s the role”). Labels make harshness efficient because the other becomes a category, not a person.
- **On the side of powerlessness:** roles can shrink identity and agency. When someone is treated primarily as a type, their op-

tions narrow, and their sense of self can become constrained by the role imposed on them.

Faith responsibility: Resist typecasting. Use names. Tell stories. Ask what fear is being managed by labeling.

Practice: "Slow down—are we solving a problem, or turning a person into the problem?"

Mechanism 2: Authority & obedience

What it is. *Authority* is perceived legitimate power (a leader, institution, policy, or expert) that shapes what feels "required." *Obedience* is compliance with that authority—often rationalized as duty, responsibility, or loyalty. Classic work on obedience shows how easily responsibility can shift upward when an authority is legitimized [Milgram, 1963, 1974].

- **On the side of power:** authority provides justification ("I'm enforcing order") and shifts responsibility upward or outward ("this is how the system works").
- **On the side of powerlessness:** authority constrains options. Compliance, silence, and strategic adaptation can become rational responses to threat and uncertainty.

Faith responsibility: In communities shaped by moral language, obedience can feel like humility or unity. That can be beautiful in healthy settings—but in unhealthy settings it can become avoidance of discernment.

Practice: "I respect authority—but I'm responsible for my choices." Discernment question: Who is harmed? Who is protected? What would love of neighbor require here?

Mechanism 3: Deindividuation & diffusion of responsibility

What it is. *Deindividuation* is when people feel less like an accountable individual and more like "part of a crowd" (anonymity, uniform, group identity). *Diffusion of responsibility* is when responsibility spreads so widely that no one feels personally accountable ("someone else will step in") [Zimbardo, 2004, 2007].

- **On the side of power:** group norms can rapidly create a new baseline. What one person does becomes what the group permits; responsibility disappears into "we."
- **On the side of powerlessness:** diffusion and fear can fracture unity. People wait for someone else to lead, or withdraw to reduce risk. This is one reason solidarity collapses under pressure.

Dr. Stanley Milgram's obedience studies illustrate Mechanism 2 & 3: ordinary people can be led into harm when authority is legitimized and responsibility shifts.

Faith responsibility: Churches are especially vulnerable to diffusion because “someone else” often sounds like virtue: “I don’t want to judge,” “I want to keep the peace,” “That’s not my place.”

Practice: If you see something, own a step.

Concrete norm: “We don’t outsource neighbor-love. We take one next step.”

Mechanism 4: Dehumanization & escalation

What it is. *Dehumanization* is any mental move—often via language—that reduces a person to a category, threat, or contaminant. *Escalation* is the step-by-step normalization of harm: small permissions (“just this once”) gradually reset the moral baseline until cruelty feels ordinary [Zimbardo, 2004, 2007].

- **On the side of power:** dehumanizing labels function like emotional insulation. “They deserve it” becomes a moral story that makes harm feel righteous.
- **On the side of powerlessness:** dehumanization can be internalized (“maybe I deserve this”), and escalating pressure can make unity feel dangerous and isolation feel safer.

Faith responsibility: Most communities don’t jump to cruelty; they drift into “small permissions.”

Practice: Interrupt early—jokes, labels, exclusions, rationalizations. Don’t wait for the headline.

Stanford Prison Experiment as a limited case study

The Stanford Prison Experiment (SPE) is vivid and influential, but also widely criticized for ethical violations and design limitations, including reported coaching/scripting and demand effects. For this lecture, Stanford is treated as an *illustrative case study*, not definitive proof [Zimbardo et al., 1999, Zimbardo, 2007]. The mechanisms above remain important because they are observable across many real institutions and social contexts.

Counterweights: Making goodness easier

The point of naming mechanisms is not to accuse; it is to build counterweights. Counterweights work by slowing automatic reactions, restoring personhood, and concentrating responsibility—so that compassion, accountability, and repair are more likely under pressure [Zimbardo, 2004].

Individual counterweights

- **Pause & awareness:** notice fear, anger, loyalty pressure, and the urge to fit in before acting.
- **Courage scripts:** prepare phrases you can actually say.
 - “Can we slow down? That’s a human being we’re describing.”
 - “What’s the next step, and who owns it?”
 - “I’m not comfortable with that language.”

Community counterweights

- **Norms of dignity:** refuse typecasting; keep people human in language and practice.
- **Repair practices:** when harm happens, the goal is repair—not exile-by-consensus.
- **Empowered bystanders:** counter diffusion by making “own a step” a shared expectation.

Institutional counterweights

- **Transparency:** processes that do not rely on “trust us,” but clarify how decisions and concerns are handled.
- **Accountability channels:** clear pathways for concerns—especially to protect the vulnerable.
- **Role clarity:** defined responsibilities and limits on power, so responsibility cannot vanish into “someone.”

Faith integration: resistance as public witness

This is not only about avoiding conflict inside the church. The same mechanisms shape public life: who society dehumanizes, who is treated as disposable, and how institutions normalize harm. Faith communities are not neutral spectators. Discipleship includes refusing scapegoating, resisting moral outsourcing, and practicing solidarity with neighbors who are vulnerable.

We can debate policy; we cannot debate dignity.

This means, in practice:

- Refusing dehumanizing language about immigrants, LGBTQ people, the poor, or any targeted neighbor.
- Resisting the temptation to disengage.
- Choosing concrete acts of neighbor-love when pressure is high.

Encouragement for a stretched-thin parish

This is not a demand to “do more” as if what you are doing is insufficient. Many people and parishes are carrying a lot. The invitation here is to remain human under pressure—and to keep going. Often the faithful step is small but real: one interruption of dehumanizing speech, one check-in with someone isolated, one act of accompaniment, one refusal to let responsibility diffuse into “someone.”

WE DO NOT NEED PERFECTION. WE NEED PRACTICE.

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