

## On the Relationship between Theology and Theories of Social Influence: Just how does Lucifer Come to Walk the Face of this Earth?

by Anthony R. Pratkanis, Ph.D.,  
University of California, Santa Cruz



The following two reviews were written about Philip Zimbardo's book, *The Lucifer Effect*, which was awarded the William James book award. Dr. Zimbardo will be giving an address at the APA convention to highlight his book and this award. Both reviewers were recommended by Dr. Zimbardo and agreed to contribute their thoughts to this column.

When I first read *The Lucifer Effect* I was struck by the spiritual message of the text. I said as much in the blurb I wrote for the back of the book – “reads like a novel, is as profound as the holiest scripture, and is at all times backed by sound scientific research.” I believed that then, and I believe this even more after reading the eloquent review by Rev. Webster.

The message of *The Lucifer Effect* is a message that can be found throughout sacred writings, particularly the Gospels of Jesus Christ. John 7:53-8:11 tells us the story of an attempt by the Pharisees to trap and discredit Jesus. They brought to him an adulteress and reminded Jesus that adultery was punishable by stoning under Mosaic Law. The Pharisees knew they were playing to the crowd – it excited their emotions to feel superior to the sinner – and the Pharisees also knew that Jesus would be in a trap – preach disobedience to the law or contradict his other teachings.

Jesus simply replied: “Let anyone among you who is without sin throw the first stone at her.” In other words, any of us could have been brought before the mob and found guilty. By a flip of the coin, some were made prisoners and some were made guards who tormented and humiliated those prisoners in a basement at Stanford University. As Samuel Butler once put it: “There but for the grace of God” goes any of us, whether it is at a basement prison, Abu Ghraib, Mi Lai or countless killing zones.

How then should one respond to the fact that anyone of us can fall from grace and perhaps even commit the most unspeakable acts? Differing answers to that question are given depending on one's theology and these in turn depend on an understanding of the nature of social influence and why people behave as they do.

The dominant or at least most vocal form of Christianity in the United States today is fundamentalism. It is a uniquely consumerist theology incapable of being put forth before the rise of an industrial consumer society of the late 1800s. According to Christian fundamentalism, Jesus died for your sins. As sinners, we run up a charge card debt of sin that we just can't pay off. All one needs to do is to believe in Jesus, and the debt is paid and the credit limit raised.

There is no need to try to save a little money or attempt to do good; no need to try to regulate outrageous credit card rates or create a world that encourages people to do the right thing for their neighbor. There is no need – Jesus just picks up the tab – and besides we couldn't do good even if we wanted to since our souls are full of irrational desires, evil impulses, and hidden persuaders. The fundamentalist Christian lives in a demon-haunted world where hidden devils attempt to steal one's very soul. Rev. Webster spells out the relationship between the theology of fundamentalism and its underlying theory of influence when he describes Milton's concept of original sin: since Adam and Eve, humans have been bad and tempted by even worse fallen angels.

The secular version of fundamental Christianity can be found in the teachings of Sigmund Freud and the recent return by academic psychology to notions of the hidden unconscious and such concepts as subliminal influence, subliminal priming, implicit attitudes, unconscious motives, cognitive neuroscience, multiple and split personalities, repressed and recovered memories, and the like. Here the irrational soul of fundamentalism is replaced with the irrational unconscious. The “devil made me do it” is replaced with “the subliminal prime made me do it.” Human behavior is not a product of interaction in a social world, but of uncontrollable and unconscious motives and implicit attitudes.

The history of the secularization of the concept of a Christian soul has been ably recounted by Robert Fuller in his book, *Americans and the Unconscious*. In brief, Mesmer replaced the metaphysical soul with the

unconscious force of animal magnetism, which could be manipulated, at first, with magnets, and, then, through hypnosis. Freud developed this unconscious force further with the notion of an impish, evil Id in constant battle with the forces of morality or the Superego. With the Id, Freud maintained the effects of original sin without the cause of a bitten apple.

Beginning in the 1890s, psychologists attempted a fruitless search for some means to talk or influence this hidden unconsciousness using such devices as hypnosis, dream analysis, free associations, projective tests such as the Rorschach, and the investigation of séances (particularly by William James). In 1900, Knight Dunlap sought to find a subliminal Müller-Lyer illusion and gave as his reason for doing so the scientific demonstration of the unconscious. As with other claims of subliminal effects, Dunlap's research promptly failed to replicate at the hands of both E. B. Titchener and Mary Washburn. Today, the hunt for the elusive unconscious continues with an IAT (or Implicit Association Test, which supposedly measures the strength of automatic associations such as hidden racism) and with a revival of subliminal claims. To date, there is still confusion over the construct validity of the IAT and the best designed subliminal studies find evidence for limited perceptual effects that rule out the possibility of more elaborate subliminal influences.

The concept of a "devil made me do it" soul and its corresponding secular irrational unconscious creates a sense of the inevitability of evil. Whether due to original sin or irrational impulses, bad things will just happen. Such a belief in my view is very dangerous. In the 1890s and early 20th century, while psychologists played a game of hunting for the unconscious, the fundamental nature of international relationships in Europe – alliances that had kept the peace since Napoleon -- were breaking down to result in global war. From the perspective of someone who believes that human behavior is the result of uncontrollable, unconscious, irrational forces, war is inevitable, and besides, with a pre-scientific understanding of social influence, what could these psychologists have offered in the way of remedy for the march to war – fire off a few subliminal messages to prevent Gavrilo Princip from assassinating Archduke Franz Ferdinand, perhaps? Today some of psychology's most prestigious members at the most prestigious universities continue to fiddle with a fruitless hunt for hidden persuaders as our planet burns with global climate change and outbreaks of genocide.

Christian fundamentalism paints a Manichean dichotomy between good and evil and an equally Manichean dichotomy of response. Those who are unwashed and have not agreed to have Jesus pick up their sinning tab are evil, and their evil can bring us all down. For this reason, as with witches in medieval times, those who commit evil deeds must be removed from the community through death or at least isolation into ghettos and prisons with little hope of salvation or reform. Abu Ghraib is the result of a few bad apples rotten to the core; no need to look further as to why it occurred or how to prevent future Abu Ghraibs. In contrast, for those who have agreed to have Jesus pick up their sinning tab, they need only remind Jesus of the bill. Today, that adulteress of Jesus's time would be paraded on national TV for a teary-eyed, mascara-stained confession of faith in Jesus. That is all the morality that is required.

In his *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Max Weber described another Christian theology which also has implications for how and why people behave as they do. According to Weber, Calvinist theology and protestant ethics created the capitalist system. Specifically, God has predetermined his elect who will find salvation and the outcast who will be damned for eternity. But how is a believer to know if he or she is among the elect? The answer: God gives the believer signs and one of the most important signs is worldly success; affluence and power in this world indicates salvation in the next. Thus, the believer works hard and saves and invests with the confidence of even better things to come in the next world. Weber developed his thesis after observing that Protestants were more likely to be among the wealthy as opposed to Catholics.

Calvinist theology places the cause of human behavior squarely on the shoulders of the individual. Evil is done by those who are evil, and goodness prevails because of the righteous. Those of good character cannot commit evil whereas those who are rotten to the core can never be saved. Much as with Christian fundamentalism, there is a Manichean divide between God's elect and Lucifer's fallen troops.

The secular version of Calvin's theology was expressed by a group of predominately personality psychologists who wrote in mass to the April 2007 *APS Observer* to protest the publication of a review of *The Lucifer Effect*. They believed – much like the Calvinist – that the sorts of

behavior seen in the Stanford prison and at Abu Ghraib is not due to the power of the situation and powerful influence but just that "Some people are more likely to turn out to be bad apples than others."

As Stanley Milgram once said after interviewing passersby who consistently made the wrong predictions about the findings of Solomon Asch: "Science is not an opinion poll." Just as a protest petition cannot be used to change the laws of gravity, so too such a petition will not change the results and implications of the Stanford Prison Experiment no matter how much we wish to be free of gravity or social influence.

A thoughtful look at the scientific evidence reveals that it is absurd to deny the power of the situation. Zimbardo selected and screened for normal participants. At a minimum, his study is an existence proof that everyday people under the pressure of influence can be induced to commit acts of harm or else that personality theory is at such a weak state that it cannot provide the measures to predict just who will be that bad apple.

Similarly, when we look across the replications of the obedience experiments conducted by Milgram two facts emerge. First, despite repeated attempts Milgram could not find a personality variable that consistently predicted obedience. Such a null result could mean either that personality is not predictive or that personality theory is too weak in its current state to make a prediction. Second, the strength of Milgram's findings, that is, the percentage that obeyed, is a function of the strength of influence used in any given replication. When Milgram weakened the nature of the authority by moving the experiment to a run down building in town (as opposed to the prestigious labs of Yale University), he obtained a lower rate of obedience. When Milgram combined the power of the authority with the power of social consensus, in effect combining an authority experiment with an Asch conformity study, he obtained the highest rates of obedience (92.5%) to produce what Peter Gabriel called "Milgram's 37" (for the 37 out of 40 subjects who obeyed). This is how to document a scientific discovery – by showing that one knows enough about the processes, in this case social influence, to increase and decrease the size of an effect.

From a scientific perspective, acknowledgement of the power of social influence does not preclude the

possibility that personality can still play a role in producing behavior. As Kurt Lewin put it:  $B = f(P, E)$  or behavior is a function of the person and the environment. Of course, if one is wedded to a Calvinist theory of elect – whether salvation is awarded spiritually by God or in a more secular manner through genes and child-rearing – then the power of social influence must be denied on dogmatic grounds.

There are a number of research strategies that can be employed for reconciling individual differences with the scientific fact that situations are powerful. For example, in investigating individual differences, Lewin advocated a research program that begins by documenting the common response to a given situation. Once that is established, it should be easier to look for individual differences. Another approach would be to look for individual differences in responses to social influence. For example, in my research on who falls prey to economic fraud, I find that con criminals use a barrage of influence tactics and that personality measures do not predict who will or will not fall prey to those tactics. However, personality measures do predict victimization for a specific fraud with victims high in internal locus of control more likely to fall prey to investment fraud whereas those high in external locus of control tend to be taken in a lottery fraud. Finally, Jerrold Post posits a provocative theory that the leaders of terrorist and extremist groups are psychopaths and narcissists who create the situation for followers. These hypotheses about the possible role of individual differences all require much more research before we can get to the point where we understand the causal nexus between and around personality and behavior.

The ethical implication of a Calvinist theory of influence is rather straightforward: the world consists of the elect and the damned; evil is committed by the sinner. As the protesting personality psychologists decree: Abu Ghraib is the result of a few bad apples rotten to the core. There is no need to look further as to why it occurred and no need to take responsibility to prevent future Abu Ghraibs. Those who commit these evil deeds must be destroyed and condemned. The elect – those without sin – must needs throw the first and last stone at that adulteress.

Taken together, fundamentalism and Calvinist theology share two characteristics that I wish to underscore.

First, both of these theologies place a premium on the influence processes of obedience and of coercion. To maintain the status of “the washed” and “the elect” requires obedience to authority and conformity to the group (the granfalloon). The primary means for dealing with those outside the group and those falling away from the group is coercion – they are sinners and need to be taught a lesson. History has shown repeatedly the perils of blind obedience. Much psychological research has found that harsh punishment and other forms of coercion often produce immediate compliance but in the long run results in reactance and negative psychological consequences. Further, by characterizing others as “unwashed and damned” or “willful and disobedient,” it becomes difficult to use other “nicer” forms of influence that may be much more effective. One is left with, say, a foreign policy based on threats and aggression as opposed to diplomacy and democratic process and child-rearing founded on spankings as opposed to inductive discipline and authoritative (democratic) parenting.

Second, assuming oneself to be among the “washed and elect” and that others are lesser than you and deserve a cruel fate is the height of arrogance and self-righteousness. Jesus reserved his most stinging rebuke for the self-righteous of his day, the Pharisees. In *The Religious Case against Belief*, James Carse graphically describes the fruits of absolute belief; such arrogance results in willful ignorance (or what an experimental social psychologist would call dissonance and the avoidance of discrepant information) and the destructive treatment of others. In contrast, Carse argues that religion should be based on higher ignorance – an inquisitive search for new truths made possible only by learning the depth of one’s own ignorance. With such learned ignorance comes humility.

A third theology, utopian in nature, is based on the rejection of the concept of original sin and the belief that at our core we humans are basically good. Rev. Webster is correct to point out that the doctrine of original sin is central to Christian theology, and thus the rejection of original sin is limited to a few left-wing Christians and Unitarians such as Amos Bronson Alcott, founder of the Fruitlands commune of 1843, and George and Sophia Ripley, founders of the utopian Brook Farm (1841-1847). This utopian theology is much more prevalent among New Age spiritualism (which has its roots in American Transcendentalism and New Thought movements), humanistic psychology, the New

Left, and Marxist communism. In utopian theology, humans would act with goodness and kindness if there wasn’t the corrupting power of “the system” with “the system” representing some polluting influence such as capitalism, white male hegemony, meat-eating, an oppressive society, modernity, globalization, Amerika, or some such all-encompassing regime.

Evil comes about through the system. For example, Marx used the metaphor of a fish in a polluted stream to capture the relationship between workers and the capitalist system and believed that through the dictatorship of the proletariat humankind would throw off the chains of oppressive capitalism. A New Soviet would emerge capable of sharing wealth in a communist system. Alcott created Fruitlands to be free of the corrupting influence of the material world with no dependence on the outside society and with its members living only off the land, eating a strict vegan diet, and using no animals in farming. Brook Farm offered the promise of living free and equal in nature without the constraints of capitalism.

In the theology of “humans are good,” redemption from evil is brought about, not by some coercive influence (as with those forms of Christianity based on original sin) but by the absence of influence. The ideal is Rousseau’s noble savage living in a state of nature and free of the politics of degenerative civilization. This ideal finds expression in the “back to nature” movement, romanticized versions of the past where humans lived in harmony and free of war, and the marketing of Barack Obama as the political outsider free of corruption and thus capable of bringing hope and change.

As Kurt Lewin and his students discovered in their research on social climate, the lack of influence – a laissez faire leadership style – does not result in positive relations, creativity, productivity or even general happiness. Indeed, according to Michels’s iron law of oligarchy such regimes will devolve to autocratic rule incapable of supporting itself. Soviet communism was an oppressive regime that took about 80 years to collapse. Fruitlands collapsed in less than 8 months and Brook Farm in less than 6 years. The social relationships in both of these communes were fraught with nastiness and intrigue as satirized in the thinly-veiled novels by Louisa May Alcott and by Nathaniel Hawthorne.

The utopian theology fails to distinguish between good and

bad influence or influence with good and bad results. All influence is suspect and bad and to be rejected. Morality is defined by the arrogance of naïve realism – *everyone should share my view of the world and will come to it naturally*. As such, there is no mechanism for reaching consensus or motivating a fellow or resolving a conflict. Since all influence is rejected, there is likewise no need to consider checks and balances on power and thus autocratic tendencies have free reign. Little wonder that – although they have been repeatedly attempted – utopias fail.

Finally, as so eloquently described by Rev. Webster, Jesus gave another approach to the fact that any of us might do wrong. His response to the adulteress brought before him: “Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.” (John 8:11). With these words, Jesus understood that any of us could find ourselves in a situation where the social pressures may lead us to do things that are unethical, immoral, and even destructive – the banality of evil. This is the principle lesson of the Stanford Prison Experiment, as well.

But the story doesn’t end there for either Jesus or for the Stanford Prison Experiment, or to put it more accurately, it did end for the Stanford Prison Experiment. Morality requires more than just talking about it and then moving on. Jesus told the woman to take responsibility for her behavior and to not sin again. He expected her to understand the causes of her behavior and to take steps so that it would not happen again. As part of taking responsibility for one’s actions, Jesus placed great importance on the role of forgiveness and making things right with those that have born the pain of another’s sin – a process that is being used for positive results in restorative justice work with offenders and one that psychologists have identified as important for emotional health. Jesus described what it meant to be a responsible person in Matthew 25 where he urged people to treat the poor, the prisoner, and the sick with dignity and concluded his sermon with the admonishment: “Whatsoever you do to the least of my people, that you do unto me.” (Matthew 25:40)

The Stanford Prison Experiment is also a lesson in taking responsibility for one’s actions, although the full meaning of this part of the story is often missed. The experiment, as we all know, was supposed to run for 14 days but was abruptly ended after 6 days when Christina Maslach saw what was going on and uttered

the now famous words: “What you are doing to those boys is a terrible thing.” Phil Zimbardo easily could have kept the experiment going by justifying to himself the possible significance of the research and could have ignored Maslach, who had only recently been a low-status graduate student. Indeed, he could have used his power as a faculty member to crush her and end her academic career. Instead, he took responsibility for his behavior and ended the study. And then he wrote a book about it and applied what he learned to situations such as Abu Ghraib, Mi Lai, Rwanda, and other places of evil in hopes of ending at least some of those.

The reason that the lesson of responsibility taught by the Stanford Prison Experiment is often missed is because the prison study is frequently portrayed as a cautionary tale of helpless people caught as the victims of unrelenting social forces. This is not, however, how I view the Stanford Prison Experiment and the other famous social psychological experiments by Asch and by Milgram demonstrating the power of the situation. A closer examination of these experiments reveals common social influence tactics – altercasting of roles, social consensus, norms, authority, grandfalloons, escalating commitments, -- that are powerfully focused on producing the undesirable behaviors of conformity, obedience that causes pain, and the mistreatment of others.

Similarly, Zimbardo’s decision to end the experiment was also brought about by common social influence tactics. Dr. Maslach was first and foremost a dissenter who broke the illusion of the situation, much as Asch found when he added confederates who did not go along with the incorrect majority. Her words also invoked a norm of responsibility and served to create empathy by asking Zimbardo to see the world from the point of view of those trapped in the experiment.

In answer to the questions, “Are we humans good or bad?” and “What is the nature of human nature?” a science of social influence reveals that we are social animals. We have as our nature the ability to dream of phantom worlds, empathize with others, reciprocate other’s action in kind, flexibly take social roles, commit ourselves to a purpose, and feel guilt over our actions, among other social-psychological processes. These core human processes serve as the basis of the social influence tactics that allow us to influence each other – for better or for worse, for good or for evil.

Knowledge of the social influences that produce good and evil allow us to make a choice about how we are to use that knowledge. Will we be like the Nazis and use social influence principles to develop propagandas of hate and accumulate power for power's sake or will we seek to use social influence for pro-social goals such as solving such problems as decreasing energy consumption or reducing intergroup conflicts? The science of social influence is a third bite of the apple, this time yielding not the knowledge of good and evil but the very means for creating good and evil.

It is here that religion especially diverges from the science of social influence. For the most part, religion has used moral exhortation and coercion as its primary means of influence, and, quite frankly, the track record of Christianity's attempt to produce Christ-like behavior has not been very successful. Already in the early church as indicated in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, Christians were divided and set one against the other. This pattern was to maintain itself across the centuries as one sect battled another sect for supremacy in a state of affairs more reminiscent of the behavior found in a simulated prison in a Stanford basement than in the words of Jesus Christ. In his excellent sociological analysis *Disquiet in the Land*, Fred Kniss documents that even the peace-oriented Mennonites are rife with conflict, which is often resolved by schism and animosity.

Apparently, "being filled with the spirit" as described in the Book of Acts, regardless of whether that spirit is taken to be literal (an actual mystical presence that changes a person's soul) or metaphorical (acceptance of Christian exhortations), does not appear to be an effective social influence agent. Ironically, even a debate on the meaning of "filled with the spirit" – for example, whether Christ's last meal should be viewed as a literal transubstantiation of the Eucharist or as a metaphor – has served as a source of conflict, which resulted in the death of human beings during the period known as the Reformation.

In contrast, a science of social influence provides the means of creating and changing behavior. In *The Lucifer Effect*, Zimbardo describes a "reverse Milgram" thought-experiment that uses the power of the situation to promote not obedience but altruism. In this thought-experiment, Zimbardo uses three well-established

influence tactics, which experiments have shown are each independently capable of producing pro-social behaviors: the foot-in-the-door tactic has increased monetary support for the disabled, organ donations to others after death, and energy conservation; social modeling has been used to lower rates of aggression, promote non-violence, increase donations to the Salvation Army and to poor children, and to increase help given to a stranger; altercasting a person as helpful promotes contributions to blood banks and to charities along with increasing the likelihood of rendering aid to another human being. Similar guidelines can be produced on how to use influence to address social problems, such as the use of the norm of reciprocity to calm international tensions or jigsaw to heal intergroup conflict (see my recent chapter in the *Handbook of Public Diplomacy*) or the use of social influence in general to promote environmentally-sound behavior.

With this essay, I hoped to make clear the intimate relationship between one's theory of influence, theology, and that which is considered moral and just. In closing, I also want to point out the implications for the tension between science and religion. Ever since Darwin, religion and science have been perceived to be at war against each other, with some such as Richard Dawkins believing that faith—belief that is not based on evidence—is one of the world's great evils and others such as Steven Jay Gould positing that science and religion address different domains with science searching for the facts and laws of nature and religion questing for an ultimate meaning of life.

The intimate relationship between influence theory and theology should make it clear that one's theology is based on one's understanding of human nature. From a scientific point of view, not all theories of human nature and influence are equal and thus religions must decide whether to maintain a faith in discredit theories and theologies or embrace scientific findings in their search for meaning. For those religions maintaining an unwarranted faith in false dogma, Dawkins's observation concerning the world's greatest evil rings true: More human beings have been killed in the name of God than in the name of Lucifer.

This does not mean that there is not a role for religion – at least, those religions that do not deny the facts of an empirical world – in understanding the role of those scientific facts in how we live our lives and in promoting a more humane world. Rev. Webster's review, in my

mind, is an example of how a person seeking spiritual and ultimate truth can best make use of scientific fact. A meaningful mission for those who follow the teachings of Christ and other moral leaders is to help us understand how and when the use of influence is moral and ethical and when it is not.

A science of social influence provides us a means to live better lives and to do more good than evil during our time in this world. More importantly, an understanding of its core findings should clothe us in humility. By a flip of a coin, we each could be that prison guard or that sinner brought before the mob or even find ourselves in that mob ready to stone to death another human being. When we understand the power of influence, we realize that we can be misled, duped, and mistaken. We understand how we humans can come to hold absolute beliefs capable of leading us to cause great harm. Thus, research on social influence in general and the Stanford Prison Experiment in particular provides another route to Carse's learned higher ignorance. To take full advantage of what a science of social influence offers, we need to accept this aspect of our nature as human beings. Perhaps then, the meek will actually inherit the earth.

ANTHONY PRATKANIS is currently Professor of Psychology at the University of California, Santa Cruz where he studies social psychology, social influence, and prejudice reduction and is a Fellow at the University of Southern California Center on Public Diplomacy at the Annenberg School. He earned his Ph.D. in 1984 from the famed social psychology program at the Ohio State University. An engaging classroom teacher, he began his career in the business school at Carnegie-Mellon University where he taught popular courses in advertising and consumer behavior. A frequent lecturer at our nation's war colleges, from 2004-2007 he served as Visiting Professor of Information Sciences at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, CA and most recently conducted a workshop at the School for Advanced Military Studies at Fort Leavenworth. In 2005, he was awarded UCSC's coveted Excellence in Teaching Award for his courses on Social Influence and Social Psychology and was named The Psychology Class of 2005's most Revered Professor.

A frequent contributor to scientific journals and the popular press on the topics of persuasion and influence, he is a co-editor of *Attitude Structure and Function*, *Social Psychology*, *The Science of Social Influence*, and a past associate editor for the *Journal of Consumer Psychology* and the founding editor of the scientific journal, *Social Influence*. His research program has investigated such topics as the delayed effects of persuasion, attitudes and memory, groupthink, affirmative action, subliminal persuasion, mass communications, source credibility, persuasion and democracy, and a variety of influence tactics such as the pique technique, phantoms, the projection tactic, the 1-in-5 prize tactic, and altercasting. He is a fellow of both the American Psychological Association and Association for Psychological Science. He has appeared in the mass media over 500 times including the Oprah Winfrey Show, Dateline NBC, CBS News, C-Span, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, New York Times, and CNN, and his research has been translated into ten different languages. He is the co-author (with Elliot Aronson) of *Age of Propaganda: The Everyday Use and Abuse of Persuasion* and (with Doug Shadel) of *Weapons of Fraud: A Source Book for Fraud Fighters*.

Dr. Pratkanis's expertise is sought by both public and private enterprises. His research on the principles of effective affirmative action (with M. E. Turner) has been featured in the popular business press, was awarded a custom baseball bat from the Cooperstown Symposium on baseball history, and has been presented in briefings to the United States Congress, the California State Legislature, and various civil rights groups. His testimony on subliminal persuasion at the trial of CBS Records/Judas Priest was instrumental in winning that case for the defense. He has served as an expert witness on behalf of the State of Oregon in their case against Publisher's Clearing House and the State of California in their cases against MCI/Worldcom and against Cingular Wireless among other cases. In 2002, he received a Telly award for his work as a scientific consultant on AARP's video, *Weapons of Fraud* (the companion video to the book by the same name). Recently, he testified before the U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging and the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission about what can be done to prevent economic fraud crimes. He has also consulted with the Office of the Director of National Intelligence on how to avoid groupthink in intelligence estimates. Currently, he is working with AARP, FINRA, civic groups, and law enforcement agencies on strategies for preventing economic fraud crimes, with government agencies including the United States military on countering the propaganda of terrorists and dictators, and with the National Association of Attorneys General's Tobacco Litigation Group as an expert on marketing and consumer behavior.

## Lucifer Effect Review: Psychology Teaches Theology About the Reality of Evil

by Rev. Curtis Webster

Rev. Curtis Webster is the Pastor and Head of Staff at First Presbyterian Church of Encino. He holds a Master of Divinity degree from San Francisco Theological Seminary and a Doctor of Jurisprudence degree from Willamette University College of Law in Salem, Oregon. Rev. Webster is co-moderator of the Lucifer Effect Theology Blog at [www.lucifereffect.com](http://www.lucifereffect.com).



Why do good people do bad things?

There's no single, simple, and definitive answer to that question. And there's no single discipline that can ever hope to provide an answer.

Psychologists, criminologists, historians, sociologists, political scientists, anthropologists, and, if I may be so bold, theologians all hold pieces to this ragged jigsaw puzzle. We all speak different languages, study different sources, proceed from different premises, and are hamstrung by different prejudices.

We all need each other, but it isn't entirely clear that we are very good at making ourselves understood when trying to talk across disciplines to one another.

Or so I had long believed . . . until I picked up Dr. Philip Zimbardo's *The Lucifer Effect*.

### SIN, EVIL, AND ZIMBARDO

I am not a professional psychologist. I am a pastor in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). I took Psych 101 about a thousand years ago and, more recently, a seminary course in Pastoral Care and Counseling. Otherwise, I normally must confess ignorance when it comes to the subtler points of Dr. Zimbardo's academic discipline.

So, I expected to experience the usual frustration of trying to grasp something outside of one's own vocational paradigm when my wife (a Stanford grad who had taken a semester of Psychology from Dr. Zimbardo) ordered *The Lucifer Effect* and told me that it sounded like something I needed to read.

Well . . . as usual . . . she was right.

And, at least as far as my fear of being overwhelmed by psycho-speak was concerned, I was wrong.

As a lay person speaking to psychologists, I must report that Dr. Zimbardo, one of your own, has (please forgive me if this sounds clichéd, but I don't quite know how else to express it) produced one of the most important books of our time.

Over on the theology side of the fence, we have been struggling for centuries going on millennia with the question of how evil infects humanity. The Christian construct, of course, has been the doctrine of Original

Sin. Adam and Eve, the first humans, were kicked out of the Garden of Eden, and their descendants have been paying for that one apple ever since.

But Original Sin has, truth be told, never really sat well with theologians. Okay, so we're all bad, but why do some of us seem badder than others? And some of us are so good that we get to be saints and have cities, rivers, and cathedrals named after us. And then there are the really, really, really bad people, like witches, who are so really, really, really bad that we have no choice but to demonstrate our Christian love by burning them alive.

Original Sin was maybe a good starting point in that it recognized the sad reality that we all have the capacity to do evil. But Original Sin was proving to be thoroughly inadequate to account for all of the infinite variations in human behavior that have cropped up over time.

The great English poet John Milton spun a very dramatic variation from the Original Sin theme with his epic "*Paradise Lost*," which, taking some pretty scanty references from Scripture, told of the fall of Lucifer, once God's favorite angel, from Heaven, and his determination to afflict humanity, God's greatest creation, with irresistible temptations to commit sin.

Lucifer was probably good for the human conscience, because his existence suggested that maybe it really wasn't all our fault and that we were being manipulated into doing evil things by a supernatural being whose power would, by definition, be far greater than our capacity to resist.

Okay, so accepting for the sake of argument that Lucifer is the real cause of our depravity, we still are stuck with the obvious reality that some folks deal with him better than others. Some of us show a remarkable strength in resisting temptation. Some of us spend our lives swimming in the sewers. Why?

The Christian failure to formulate a comprehensive explanation for the persistence of evil is not for lack of trying. Some of the greatest intellects in the history of theology have tackled this question, and so have some of the biggest crackpots. I won't even try to survey the results here. I will note that we Christians have produced some pretty insightful work around this issue, as well as some utter garbage.

## MY BRUSH WITH LUCIFER

My own questing for an answer was born some twenty years ago when, in a prior professional life, I was climbing up the ladder of one corner of corporate America. I will spare you the details, but let it suffice to say that I wound up working in support of some very questionable policies and practices.

I had thought of myself as a good person. Up until my time in the corner office, I had been a give-back-extra-change-at-the-grocery-store never-tell-a-lie kind of guy. And most of the folks I was working alongside similarly gave every outward appearance of a solid ethical grounding.

But, there we were, facilitating the rape-and-pillage orgy of corporate takeovers that was so fashionable back in the Eighties.

Why? How? Why me? Was I really a bad person after all? Was I too stupid to see what was happening or too weak to resist it? Had I turned my back on everything that I thought my upbringing had stood for?

These questions had been rattling around in my psyche for years and, even with my quite sudden and completely unforeseen call to professional ministry, I had not really found any kind of basis for answering them.

And then . . . Dr. Zimbardo showed up . . .

## A PSYCHOLOGIST AND A THEOLOGIAN?

I would be way overstating my case to assert that *The Lucifer Effect*, all by its magnificent little self, has finally and definitively solved the puzzle of evil and its influence on human behavior. Not so. We still have a lot to learn about ourselves and how we from time to time fall for Lucifer's seductive charm, but Dr. Zimbardo has managed to drop a whole new set of clues into our laps that just might point us toward a much deeper understanding.

Since reading *The Lucifer Effect*, I have become aware of the debate amongst psychologists over the relative importance of disposition vs. situation in decisively influencing human behavior. Dr. Zimbardo weighs in on the situational side of the debate.

I quite obviously lack the credentials to enter into that debate in any technical sense. There appears to be academically credible evidence on both sides of the issue, and I'm not going to presume to try to analyze it.

What I will say is that *The Lucifer Effect* makes total intuitive sense to me. Dr. Zimbardo took what had been an inarticulate lump of personal feelings and impressions and gave me a language in which to express them and a construct around which to organize them.

And Dr. Zimbardo has given me a precious cross-disciplinary gift. There is more theology in *The Lucifer Effect* than the simple choice of using Lucifer as a metaphor. Whether or not Dr. Zimbardo was consciously aware of what he was doing, he was providing psychological validation of some of Christ's most important teachings.

Now, this assertion I'm making about a latent synergy between psychology and theology is going to take some explaining. Let's start with the basics of Dr. Zimbardo's work.

## THE STANFORD PRISON EXPERIMENT

All roads necessarily lead back to the famous (infamous?) Stanford Prison Experiment of 1971 conducted by Dr. Zimbardo. What began as an inquiry into the psychological effects of incarceration morphed into an unintended study of the situational forces that can cause otherwise rational and ethically-literate human beings to erupt into violence and cruelty.

The "guards" in Dr. Zimbardo's mock prison, originally intended as props to enhance the sense of reality of prison life, very quickly took center stage. The volunteer guards, all of whom had displayed no obvious signs of pathology when given psychological screenings, almost immediately were transformed from quasi-hippies into sneering, authoritarian, power-tripping thugs.

With absolutely zero experience of any kind in a penal institution or law enforcement agency, these kids fell into their assigned roles with a frightening speed. Perhaps they were echoing stereotypes about "pigs" that were so prevalent in the youth culture of the day, but they quickly blew past any sense of parody. Collectively, the guards became truly bad dudes who seemingly took great delight in tormenting their helpless and vulnerable charges.

Dr. Zimbardo himself admits to being swept up by the situational forces as he pretty thoroughly internalized the role of prison superintendent, allowing that role to cloud his own judgment about how the experiment should proceed. (In one amusing interlude, he tells of becoming panic-stricken by a rumor of a jail break and the rather paranoid lengths to which he and his research team went to try to defend "their jail.")

## WHAT THE GUARDS CAN TEACH US

Dr. Zimbardo has since come to identify several important factors that bore upon the misbehavior of the guards, but the two that appear to have the greatest universal relevance are de-individuation of self and de-humanization of others.

The guards' individuality pretty quickly became submerged into a state of group anonymity. The guards' focus shifted from "I as individual" to "I as guard." For most of the guards, the roles which they had assumed became

the primary determinants of behavior, with their own moral compasses becoming secondary.

Added to this de-individuation process was a systematic de-humanization of the prisoners. Each prisoner was assigned a number and was identified by that number and not his name. The prisoners were dressed in hospital-smock gowns and stocking caps.

And so, in the relatively benign environment of the campus of Stanford University, anonymous guards who should have known better heaped abuse upon equally anonymous prisoners who had done nothing to deserve such cruel treatment.

Take that template, drop it into real-world situations, and, as Dr. Zimbardo demonstrates, you will soon witness the perpetration of institutional evil on larger and more ominous scales. We need only a handful of examples to grasp Lucifer's destructive potential:

--The persecution and extermination of Jews, homosexuals, and gypsies in Nazi Germany.

--The imprisonment, torture, and execution of "intellectuals" and other "class enemies" by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia.

--The brutal executions of Tutsis by Hutus in Rwanda (as well as previous executions of Hutus by Tutsis).

While genocide may be the most egregious example of institutional evil, it is by no means the only example. America, with its legacy of civil liberties, must wrestle with its own conscience in the wake of the revelations of the routine use of torture at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo.

Dr. Zimbardo, who appeared as an expert witness on behalf of one of the defendants in the trials of the Abu Ghraib guards, pretty convincingly demonstrates the commonalities shared by all of these sorry incidents. When people surrender their moral and ethical identity to a larger group and then de-humanize an out-group, oppression, torture, and worse seem to follow.

Now back to the theological question. What might all of this have to do with Jesus?

#### LIBERATING THE GOLDEN RULE FROM ITS GOLDEN CAGE

If you've spent any time at all with the Christian faith, you have undoubtedly heard of the Golden Rule. There are many formulations of the Golden Rule in Scripture, but let's take this one from Luke 10:27 (repeated to Jesus, interestingly enough, by a lawyer):

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and

with all your might, and your neighbor as yourself."

Unfortunately, we have largely turned the Golden Rule into a Hallmark card, a high-sounding platitude to be applauded when it is spoken and otherwise completely ignored. The Golden Rule is something that we have Sunday School students memorize so that we may then comfort ourselves that we have made a good faith effort to impart some ethical training.

We have de-clawed the Golden Rule, emptied it of its more revolutionary implications, and safely locked it away in a piety vault where it need never inconvenience us in our lives out there in the "real world."

But, embedded within the Golden Rule, which came straight out of the Hebrew traditions embodied in the Old Testament, is the antidote for institutional evil.

And it took Dr. Zimbardo, a self-professed "lapsed Catholic," to help me see that.

If we take the Golden Rule seriously and commit to apply it to our lives, we have no choice but to resist both de-individuation and de-humanization. Here, and in so many other places, Jesus challenges us to step out of the comfort of group identification and to treat all other human beings as individuals worthy of our respect.

I chose the Lukan formulation of the Golden Rule to use here because it leads directly into the parable of the Good Samaritan, which was quite possibly the most revolutionary of all Jesus' parables.

#### A SAMARITAN? REALLY?

Just like the Golden Rule, the Good Samaritan parable is a piece of the Gospel which we have managed to sanitize and rob of its more provocative content. This parable is not a simple exhortation to go out and help people. It is, rather, a powerful challenge to any system which relies upon de-individuation and de-humanization to enforce an "us-them" mentality upon its population.

The story is deceptively simple. A man is traveling alone along the road to Jericho (a notoriously dangerous place in Jesus' time). He is set upon by bandits, who rob him, beat him, strip him, and leave him pretty much to die by the side of the road.

Along come first a priest and then a Levite, both highly revered within Jesus' community. Neither one of them stops to help, but then a Samaritan shows up.

And here's where we usually drop the ball in explaining this parable. For lots of historical reasons, the Jews in Judea had come to hate Samaritans with a passion. The simple use of the word "Samaritan" was calculated to cause

discomfort and the use of a Samaritan as the hero of the piece was absolutely shocking.

Jesus was here challenging one of His own community's most deeply felt cultural prejudices. As a dramatist, Jesus was using the reversal of audience expectations to make a point that probably could not be made with rational argument.

If you have to embrace a (yuck!) Samaritan as a "neighbor," a fellow human being who is as likely as you to demonstrate kindness and compassion, then you have to accept that no one deserves to be stereotyped.

Step out of your communal biases, Jesus tells His stunned Judean followers, and approach everyone whom you meet with dignity and integrity. There is no room for either de-individuation or de-humanization.

#### THE GOLDEN RULE AS A UNIVERSAL ETHIC

I approach the Golden Rule from a Christian perspective because that's who I am.

But, open-minded study of the great faith traditions of the world will uncover some form of the Golden Rule in just about all of them.

And I have to acknowledge that a "Golden Rule ethic" is also embraced by many atheists and agnostics.

For thousands and thousands of years, something has been telling human beings to resist evil. Whether you want to call that something God, Jesus, Allah, Krishna, the Buddha, the Great Spirit, or the human conscience, it has been trying to give us the solution to the problem of institutional evil.

And, the world over, we seem to have been nodding our heads, saying "that's nice," and then going about our evil business.

And, no, I don't expect *The Lucifer Effect* to affect a magic reversal of humanity's benign neglect of the Golden Rule. Thousands of years of ingrained behavior cannot be erased by a single book, no matter how inspired, well-written, and persuasive that book might be.

But, I do expect *The Lucifer Effect* to help start a cultural process of re-examining all of our assumptions about the nature of evil and the most effective ways to counter the influence of evil.

#### HOPE IN THE FACE OF LUCIFER

Especially in cultures derived from Europe, we seem to have difficulty dealing intellectually with phenomena that cannot be quantified or measured. This would appear to be one of the burdens that we must accept alongside all of the obvious benefits of the scientific method.

*The Lucifer Effect* deals with institutional evil in a more quantifiable context. Dr. Zimbardo shows us the patterns of evil and the environmental factors which are most likely to breed evil. He gives us a remarkable set of analytical tools. Maybe, just maybe, we can start doing a better job culturally of seeing evil coming and, possibly, heading it off.

In the final chapter of *The Lucifer Effect*, Dr. Zimbardo re-formulates his focus as investigating why some people manage to do good in spite of the pressure of institutional evil.

His description of the work of heroes is as uplifting and encouraging as his earlier journeys through the depths of institutional evil are depressing.

From a theological perspective, the common thread running through all of Dr. Zimbardo's hero archetypes is the capacity to embrace whatever variation on the Golden Rule is appropriate to the hero's culture. Heroes are people who keep hold of their individuality in spite of strong institutional pressure to the contrary and refuse to participate in the de-humanization of others.

#### BACK TO THE ORIGINAL QUESTION

Why do good people do bad things?

It's still an extraordinarily challenging question, but *The Lucifer Effect* shows us that we need neither throw our hands up in despair nor recite a simplistic answer that tells us nothing useful.

Good people do bad things because they fail to recognize the powerful effects of culture and institutions upon their behavior. Good people do bad things because they almost unwittingly forsake their moral and ethical heritage. Good people do bad things because evil has a particular genius for manipulating their fears and prejudices into unthinking hatred for those who are different.

Good people will stop doing bad things when they can learn to analyze institutional settings and see the twin evils of de-individuation and de-humanization at work upon them. Good people will stop doing bad things when their dominant cultures learn to nurture enduring moral and ethical values that can resist decay in the face of institutional pressure. Good people will stop doing bad things when they can embrace all of humanity as their neighbors and reject de-humanizing stereotypes.

And, with *The Lucifer Effect*, Dr. Philip Zimbardo opens up the possibility that the day may indeed come when good people will stop doing bad things.