

**Intellectual Disability and Girardian Mimesis:
Emerging Connections**

Paper given at:

Conference of the Colloquium on Violence and Religion
in partnership with Association Recherches Mimétiques
at the Catholic Institute of Paris

Paris, France

June 14-17, 2023

By Susan McElcheran

PhD Candidate

St. Michael's College Faculty of Theology

University of Toronto

The Challenge

Girardian scholar Scott Garrels has noted connections between Girard's mimetic theory and recent scientific research showing the crucial role of imitation in human development. Yet, as Garrels observes, there have been fewer connections made between the social and human sciences and the wider social and historical applications of mimetic theory. Specifically in stigma theory and disability studies, Girard's thought has not been significantly used even though disability is one of his stereotypes of persecution. This deficit reflects the need noted by Garrels, who has challenged the social sciences to investigate "the role that reciprocal mimesis has in generating acts of social rivalry, conflict, and ultimately violence".¹ Stigma theory, especially as applied to intellectual disability, shows promising potential for connections with mimetic theory. Lerita Coleman Brown observes that, although the phenomenon of stigma has been extensively described, the motivations and mechanisms underlying stigma have not been thoroughly investigated.² Licia Carlson's work in the philosophy of intellectual disability proposes that people with intellectual disabilities have functioned as a mirror in different ways for the rest of society. These related fields both exhibit mimetic aspects that have not yet been directly connected with Girard's theory.

I propose that an exploration of the role of mimesis in stigma theory and in the philosophy of intellectual disability can illuminate mimetic processes in the development of the category of intellectual disability and address heretofore neglected motivations and mechanisms governing attitudes toward the personhood of people with intellectual disabilities. In this paper I will use the work of Lerita Coleman Brown on stigma theory, philosopher Licia Carlson, and

¹ Scott Garrels, "Imitation, Mirror Neurons, and Mimetic Desire: Convergence Between the Mimetic Theory of Rene Girard and Empirical Research on Imitation", *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture*, Issue 12-13, 2005-2006, pp. 47-86.

² Lerita Coleman Brown, "Stigma: An Enigma Demystified" p. 147-160 in Lennard Davis, *The Disability Reader*

theologian Hans Reinders among others to test this hypothesis. I suggest that some connections that emerge from a comparison of these fields are found in Girard's 'signs of a victim'; links between mimetic desire and the fear of stigma; and the social structure of scapegoating.

What does Girard say about stigma and disability?

Girard refers to disability directly in *The Scapegoat*, where he describes it as one of the 'stereotypes of persecution'. He explains that victims are often chosen "because they belong to a class that is particularly susceptible to persecution": this includes cultural, religious, or ethnic minorities, and those who are sick, experiencing mental health issues, or who show any kind of disability.³ In *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, he clarifies this further in his discussion of the features seen in all victims chosen for sacrificial rituals: "the homeless, those without family, the disabled and ill, abandoned old people"⁴ and in the list of those persecuted by medieval mobs: "lepers, Jews, foreigners, women, those who are disabled, marginal persons of every sort."⁵ Girard does not use the word 'stigma' here, but his identification of groups prone to victimization bears resemblances to stigma theory. Connections between Girard's thought and stigma theory can address what Lerita Coleman Brown describes as a gap in research on the motivations and mechanisms underlying the phenomenon of stigma, and can shed light on issues in the study of intellectual disability.

Connections between Stigma Theory and Mimetic Theory

In her investigation of the motivations and mechanisms behind stigma, Coleman Brown suggests three components of stigma: fear, stereotyping, and social control. What follows is my discussion of how these three components of stigma relate to Girard's thought.

³ René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 17-18.

⁴ René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, trans. James G. Williams (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2022), 76.

⁵ Ibid, 75.

First, Coleman Brown identifies the affective component of stigma as fear. She makes it clear that stigmatizing others is not innate in children and must be learned. She says that although children perceive differences and have preferences, they do not stigmatize certain differences until they learn to do so from parents and significant adults.⁶ She calls this process self-referencing, but the similarity with mimetic desire is clear. Girard's insight is that this borrowing of desire arises from an absence of being in the person who borrows the desire and the being of another. I suggest that the fear that Coleman Brown posits as the learned affective component of stigma is the flip side, or inverse, of mimetic desire. As we do not know what to desire until we borrow our desires from our models, so we do not know what to fear, what to actively shun, until we also learn this from our models. There is a fear of stigma itself, and of those who are stigmatized, as if their stigma were contagious, and they are avoided lest the stigma spread to those around them.⁷ All people are afraid of stigma because of the fundamental fact that it could be anyone, that any human difference can be stigmatized.

A second point of comparison between mimetic theory and stigma theory is the phenomenon of stereotyping. Coleman Brown notes that stereotyping serves to replace the person's identity with the stigmatized identity, neutralizing all positive qualities and undermining individual identity.⁸ Girard observes the transformation of the victim's identity from innocent to guilty in the perception of the persecutor.⁹ He notes the assigning of "physical and moral monstrosity" to the victim in justification of their persecution.¹⁰ The efficacy of the sacrifice depends on a "true belief in what I have called the stereotype of accusation, the guilt and the

⁶ Coleman Brown, "Stigma", 150-151.

⁷ Ibid, 155-156.

⁸ Ibid, 152.

⁹ Girard, Scapegoat, 35.

¹⁰ Ibid, 35.

apparent responsibility of the victims.”¹¹ Girard insists that this illusory identity must be widely shared, that it is a social consensus, just as stigma is a social consensus.¹²

A final way in which Girard’s theory relates to stigma is what James Alison refers to as the ‘structure of scapegoating’ that is more widespread than the single-victim mechanism. The mimetic process that is at the root of scapegoating is more pervasive and ongoing than occasional episodes of blatant exclusion by a mob. It is, as Alison says, in “the way we define ourselves by contrast with others, who then become ‘evil’ and as such are necessary to our self-understanding and our security.”¹³ This relates to the underlying motivation for stigma as social control. In her discussion of social control through stereotyping, Coleman Brown gives evidence showing that people who are not well-off socially tend more towards negative stereotypes of others, bringing a dynamic of scarcity into play.¹⁴ This strengthens the picture of stigma as a mimetic process in which social status and control is the desired commodity.

Girard and Intellectual Disability

Fear as the inverse of mimetic desire, stereotyping with a victim identity, and the ‘structure of scapegoating’ as a means of social control are all operative in the field of intellectual disability. Licia Carlson, in her book *The Faces of Intellectual Disability: Philosophical Reflections*, has particularly opened up possibilities of connections with mimetic theory by looking at the way people with intellectual disabilities have functioned as a mirror in various ways for the rest of society. Here, I will consider the three connections between stigma and mimetic theory above and apply them to Carlson’s work in the development of the category

¹¹ Girard, *Scapegoat*, 39.

¹² *Ibid*, 39.

¹³ James Alison (interviewee), “Violence Undone: James Alison on Jesus as Forgiving Victim,” in *The Christian Century* (123 no 18 Sep 05 2006), 31.

¹⁴ Coleman Brown, “Stigma”, 152.

of intellectual disability before exploring how they relate to the philosophical question of the human personhood of people with intellectual disabilities.

The “Faces” of Intellectual Disability and the Mask of the Victim

In her analysis of the history of intellectual disability in America, Carlson exposes the phenomenon of projection onto people with intellectual disabilities of the biases and presuppositions of those in controlling positions in society. Echoing Coleman Brown’s explanation of stereotyping as an attempt at cognitive mastery through categorization, Carlson says these projections are often attempts to render people with intellectual disabilities intelligible.¹⁵ Carlson’s description of the stereotypes that have been imposed on people with intellectual disabilities reveal stereotyping with a victim identity and scapegoating as a means of social control, as well as demonstrating the operation of fear as the inverse of mimetic desire.

Stereotyping and Social Control: the Face of Authority

Carlson identifies two developments that enabled professionals in the field of intellectual disability to be regarded as experts and to gain authority by defining and categorizing types of intellectual disability. The first was the rise of institutions for the feeble-minded in the mid-nineteenth century, which created new opportunities for studying and grouping people with intellectual disabilities. The superintendents of these institutions became a new class of experts, along with the psychologists and physicians who studied the inmates.¹⁶ A second development enabling this professional class to gain authority was the increase in mental testing initiated by the invention of the IQ test.¹⁷ A vast array of experts gained power through naming and defining

¹⁵ Carlson, *Faces*, 190.

¹⁶ Carlson, *Faces of Intellectual Disability*, 25-6; 106.

¹⁷ Licia Carlson, *The Faces of Intellectual Disability: Philosophical Reflections*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), 105.

intellectual disability.¹⁸ The face of authority often imputed to people with intellectual disabilities a stereotyped identity that responds more to the presuppositions of those in control than actual personal identity.

One salient feature of these stereotyped identities is the moral judgments that have almost always accompanied diagnoses of intellectual disability. Carlson notes that people with intellectual disabilities have been associated with criminality and low morals. The practice of mental testing revealed a category of “high grade feeble-minded” not living within the institution, who were associated with social problems such as criminal activity, sexual immorality, and pauperism.¹⁹ The “moral imbecile” was a category bridging the gap between the feeble-minded in the institution and the criminal class outside it. Superintendents of institutions in the late nineteenth century specialized in writing about the “moral imbecile”. This group was viewed as especially dangerous due to its ability to propagate, so it was a target of the eugenics movement to cure society of its evils.²⁰

These features show two shared elements in Girard’s thought and stigma theory: the replacing of individual identity with a stereotyped identity of the victim, and the self-definition as ‘normal’ by contrast with the other who is defined with moral opprobrium in order to maintain the secure and normalized identity of the group in control. The following discussion will reveal the third component of stigma, mimetic fear, and how it relates to intellectual disability.

The Humanity of People with Intellectual Disabilities and the Face of the Beast

Carlson’s work rejoins mimetic theory in consideration of the human personhood of people with intellectual disabilities. She writes in response to several contemporary philosophers

¹⁸ Ibid, 107-119.

¹⁹ Ibid, 39.

²⁰ Carlson, 43.

who have used people with intellectual disabilities as a test case in their arguments for animal rights. These philosophers have observed that some intelligent animals demonstrate higher levels of rationality than many severely intellectually disabled persons, and they complain that we are guilty of ‘speciesism’ if we unfairly value members of our own species who lack reason over other species who show rational capacities. One of these philosophers, Jeff McMahan, has argued that, since reason is what he uses to define human personhood, the higher level of rationality in some animals should be acknowledged by according them a greater value than we do currently, while the lower level of rationality in people with intellectual disabilities means that they should be treated with less value than we currently give them.²¹ McMahan says that moral status as human persons *might* be granted to severely intellectually disabled individuals *only* in the case where they have a family member who would be offended if they were treated as inhuman. Philosopher Frank De Rose asks why it would be morally repugnant to kill mentally disabled children; as he puts it with unnecessary violence, why should they not be put in front of a bulldozer to crush them.

To address this issue I would like to introduce Girard’s recounting of the story of the beggar of Ephesus. Philostratus writes that the people of Ephesus have been suffering from a terrible plague and they call on Apollonius to help them. Apollonius directs the crowd’s attention to a blind beggar and tells them to stone him. At first the crowd only pities the beggar, but as Apollonius mobilizes the crowd to throw stones, the beggar seems to change before their eyes and is transformed into a beast with wild eyes. It seems less violent to kill a wild beast than a harmless beggar. As the violence escalates, he seems to transform into a demon.²²

²¹ Carlson, 134-5.

²² Girard, I See Satan, 49-50.

I use this story to show connections with what Carlson calls the “Face of the Beast”, that is, the tendency to see animality rather than human personhood in people with intellectual disabilities. Girard speaks of the transformation of the victim’s identity to animality that takes place in the eyes of the persecutors as they choose a scapegoat. Carlson exposes the associations with animality that have appeared in philosophical writing about people with intellectual disabilities, particularly in connection with animal rights. She notes that philosophers tend to use terminology that is outdated and still carries overtones of moral opprobrium: terms like “idiot”, “imbecile”, “retarded”, and “moron”, that were common in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century classifications still persist in the writings of some philosophers.²³ Carlson says that the “appearance [of these terms] in philosophical literature at least half a century after they were abandoned as scientific labels is surprising, puzzling, and worthy of attention.”²⁴ I ask whether the continued stereotyping of people with intellectual disabilities and the assigning to them of negative moral traits and animal-like characteristics betrays a mimetic process underlying the writings of these philosophers. As Girard says, “physical and moral monstrosity are heaped together in myths that justify the persecution of the infirm ... the definition of victim as sinner and criminal is so absolute in myth”.²⁵

Is there a fear of intellectual disability that underlies this stereotyping and attribution of animality? The truth seems to be that people with intellectual disabilities are feared because we know their fate could be ours. This mimetic relationship with people with intellectual disabilities is evidence of their humanity. The fear and stigmatization of people with intellectual disabilities betrays an instinctive knowledge at the most basic level that *we are the same*. Mimetic rivalry

²³ Carlson, 108.

²⁴ Carlson, 109.

²⁵ Ibid, 36

takes place between *people*; although humans can compete with other species for control of the earth's resources, that rivalry does not inspire the mimetic desire and fear that arises in rivalry between human persons. As Carlson points out, the sentiment "There but for the grace of God go I" is not something we say of our relationship with animals.²⁶

The Humanity of People with Intellectual Disabilities and the Image of God

Carlson says that the person with intellectual disabilities seems to be a philosopher's worst nightmare, like a blind audience for a film-maker.²⁷ An investigation of theological attempts to address the issue indicates that the very existence of people with lacking reason is also a nightmare for theologians. Most theology on the subject seems to take the approach of trying to prove the humanity of people with intellectual disability. Hans Reinders and Molly Harshaw have invented new theological anthropologies to try to understand how people lacking rational capacities can be said to be in the image of God.²⁸ Jill Harshaw has remarked that there is an overly defensive stance in these new anthropologies. As she puts it, "Is the search on for a life-giving theological anthropology for any other group of people?"²⁹ This stance betrays a preoccupation with reason and its absence, and a consequent difficulty in accepting the humanity of people with intellectual disabilities.

As in the discussion of the face of the beast in philosophers' treatment of people with intellectual disabilities, I suggest that mimetic theory can enlighten the processes by which those deficient in rationality have been assumed not to embody the image of God. It is worth asking whether the definition of the image of God has been distorted through a process of mimetic

²⁶ Carlson, 202.

²⁷ Carlson, *Faces*, 4.

²⁸ Reinders, Hans S. *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2008). Molly Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability: Human Being as Mutuality and Response*. (Fordham University Press: New York, 2012).

²⁹ Jill Harshaw, *The Spirituality of People with Profound Cognitive Disability*, (2016), 49

rivalry concerning reason and intelligence, and whether it reflects elements of fear, stereotyping, and social control.

Girardian Vision of Culture and Religion

The process of stigmatization of people with intellectual disabilities seems from this discussion to embody mimetic components, but does it reflect Girard's vision of the origin of religion and culture in the violence of the victim mechanism? The attitude of society toward people with intellectual disabilities does not involve religious rituals but I suggest it assumes an operant theology, meaning an unarticulated framework of beliefs and commitments, rather than any openly stated dogma or doctrine. If a society of 'normals' is created and defined as over-against the other who is judged as morally deficient, then that society is in effect sacrificing the other in order to construct a 'normal' identity. It is a sacrificial society, not necessarily in the sense of religious ritual sacrifice but in the sense of a lived stance of beliefs and commitments. Girard notes that the myth-making process does not work anymore in our world except in a very weakened form, by this explaining that victimization no longer results in a religion with rituals and a mythology.³⁰ Yet, the mimetic process can still be seen in the learned, mimetic fear of stigma, the stereotyping of the victim by the persecutors, and the structure of scapegoating that defines self in contrast with the morally deficient other.

Conclusion

This exploration has shown that investigating connections between Girardian theory and intellectual disability can be fruitful. Development of the category of intellectual disability and perceptions of the human personhood of people with intellectual disabilities have been deeply

³⁰ Girard, *I See Satan*, 73.

influenced by mimetic relationships, by assigned stigma of victimhood, and by a social structure of scapegoating.

Bibliography

Alison, James. *The Joy of Being Wrong*. New York: Crossroad, 1998.

_____. (interviewee). "Violence Undone: James Alison on Jesus as forgiving victim." *Christian Century* September 5, 2006.

Carlson, Licia. *The Faces of Intellectual Disability: Philosophical Reflections*. Bloomington and Indianapolis IN: Indiana University Press, 2010.

Coleman Brown, Lerita. "Stigma: An Enigma Demystified." 147-160 in Davis, Lennard J. *The Disability Studies Reader*. 4th ed. New York, NY: Routledge, 2013.

Girard, René. *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*. Trans. James G. Williams. 10th ed. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011.

_____. *The Scapegoat*. Translated by Yvonne Freccero. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986.

_____. *Things Hidden from the Foundation of the World*. Translated by Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1978.

Goffman, Erving. *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. New York: J. Aronson, 1974.

Harshaw, Jill. *God Beyond Words: Christian Theology and the Spiritual Experience of People with Profound Intellectual Disabilities*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2016.

Haslam, Molly. *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability: Human Being as Mutuality and Response*. Fordham University Press: New York, 2012.

Palaver, Wolfgang. *The Mimetic Theory of René Girard*. Translated by Gabriel Borrud. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013.

Rapley, Mark. "Intellectual Disability as a Social and Diagnostic Category", p. 30-77, and "Some Tentative Conclusions", p. 196-209 in *The Social Construction of Intellectual Disability*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Reinders, Hans S. *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2008.