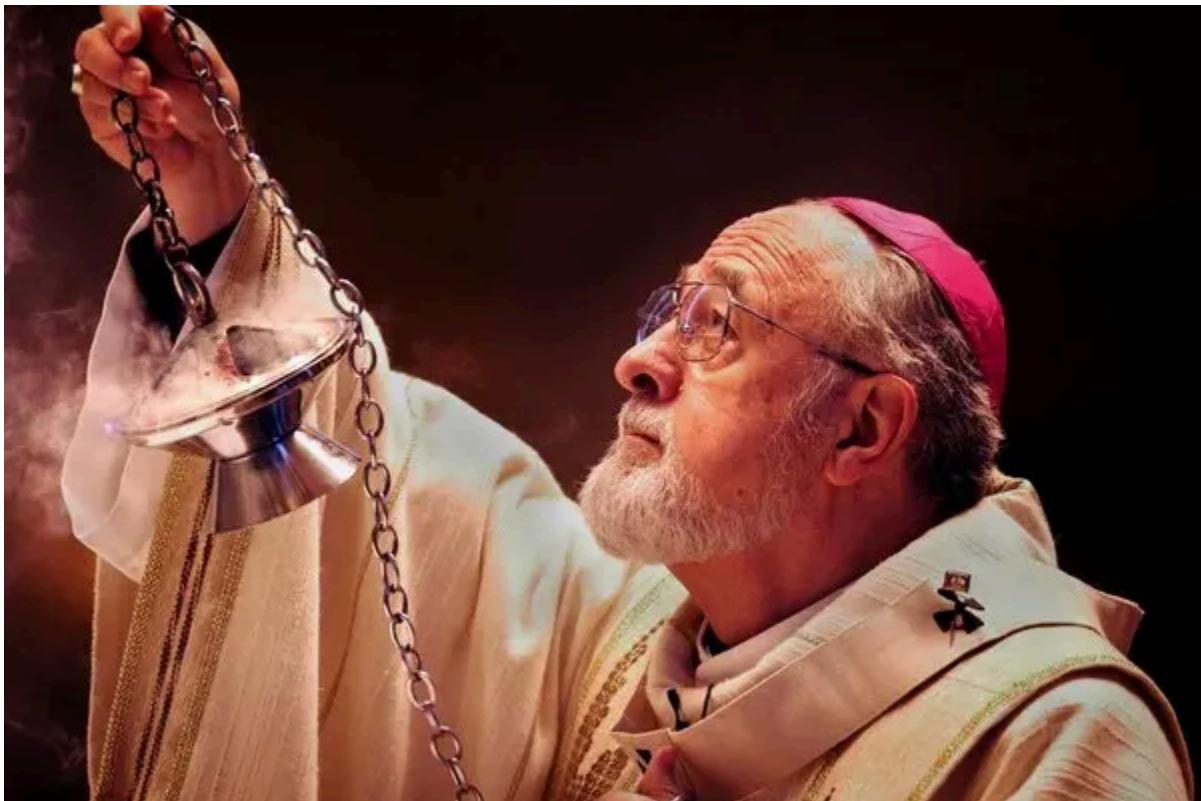


When a Monster Appears Just in Time: Jeff Dahmer and Archbishop Weakland's Convenient Distraction

In the summer of 1991, Milwaukee was rocked by the arrest of Jeff Dahmer and the “horrific revelations” that followed. The case dominated headlines worldwide. Behind the scenes of this sensational case stood Archbishop Rembert Weakland, who led the Archdiocese of Milwaukee from 1977 to 2002—a tenure that precisely overlapped with both the Dahmer case and a **growing crisis of clerical abuse within the Catholic Church.**





Weakland's Precarious Position in 1991

By 1991, Archbishop Weakland was facing increasing pressure regarding his handling of clerical abuse cases:

- Multiple allegations against [Father Lawrence Murphy](#), who had allegedly molested up to 200 deaf children at St. John's School for the Deaf, had been brought to Weakland's attention since 1977
- Organizations like [SNAP](#) (Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests), founded in 1988, were beginning to connect previously isolated victims
- Courts had begun recognizing institutional liability for failing to prevent abuse by employees
- Media coverage of clerical abuse was increasing, though not yet at the level it would reach after the [2002 Boston Globe investigation](#)

Weakland had cultivated a public image as a progressive Catholic leader, advocating for economic justice and holding "[listening sessions](#)" with marginalized groups. This carefully crafted persona stood in stark contrast to his behind-the-scenes handling of predatory priests, whom he typically [reassigned](#) or sent for treatment rather than reporting to authorities.

As pressure mounted, Weakland needed a way to manage public perception. His response to the story about Jeff Dahmer was telling—despite being Milwaukee's highest-ranking Catholic leader during a profound community trauma, Weakland maintained a conspicuous public distance. The few statements he made were remarkably minimal and indirect: a warning against becoming "preoccupied with the gruesome events surrounding the serial murders" and a vague psalm about "understanding evil" without directly referencing Dahmer. (See the news clippings below.)

This strategic minimization makes more sense when we understand how the Dahmer case functioned as a psychological anchor that would benefit the Archdiocese's handling of predatory priests.

Keep a perspective

Wisconsin's grim summer should be kept in balance

It has been a grim summer here in south-eastern Wisconsin with headlines dominated by the Joachim Dressler trial and the Milwaukee slaughter of as many as 17 young men.

Milwaukee Archbishop Rembert Weakland last week [warned of the danger of becoming preoccupied with the gruesome events surrounding the serial murders](#).

Weakland said he had begun to restrict himself to a "rapid reading" of the morning and evening papers — not because he blamed the media for the extensive coverage of the case, but because "it is my role to choose from all that news what is necessary and helpful to me."

He raises a good point.

There are other things going on in the world around us and it would do us all good to avoid a fixation on the macabre events that have unfolded in our back yard this past summer.

In other parts of the world, the Arabs and Israelis are inching toward a peace conference that could end 43 years of conflict; on Friday, President Bush announced that Greece and Turkey had agreed to discuss their 17-year-old feud over the divided island of Cyprus; and the long cold relationship between the U.S. and Soviet Union has finally thawed.

There are bright spots all around our world today.

Yes, we have to deal with the harshness of the real world: the Dressler and the Dahmer cases.

But we must also take a break from that harshness and keep a perspective on things.

It wouldn't be a bad idea to load up the kids and head for the State Fair for an afternoon.

There you might get a better look at what Wisconsin is really about.



Rainfair str

To the editor:

Milwaukee archbishop prays for compassion for criminals, victims

MILWAUKEE (CNS) — Milwaukee Archbishop Rembert G. Weakland in a **psalm written for his archdiocesan newspaper** prayed for an understanding of evil and for compassion toward criminals and their victims.

He did not make any direct references but seemed to allude to the grisly murders discovered in recent weeks in Milwaukee.

"Teach us to love one another—with no exceptions, no lukewarmness," he wrote. "Teach us to realize that all people, even those who seem to us cruel and evil, are your creatures and, as such, of value to you and loved by you; remind us that your loving hand, stretched out to them is never withdrawn."

The archbishop wrote the psalm as his regular "Herald of Hope" weekly column for the Catholic Herald.

Police found 11 mutilated bodies in the Milwaukee apartment of Jeffrey L. Dahmer on July 22. They believe he is responsible for at least 17 killings.

Milwaukee police said July 29 that Dahmer had confessed to at least 15 slayings: the 11 whose remains were found in his apartment; one slain in Bath, Ohio, near his boyhood home; two killed at his grandmother's house in the Milwaukee suburb of West Allis; and a man who was slain at an unspecified location after going to a gay pride parade in Chicago.

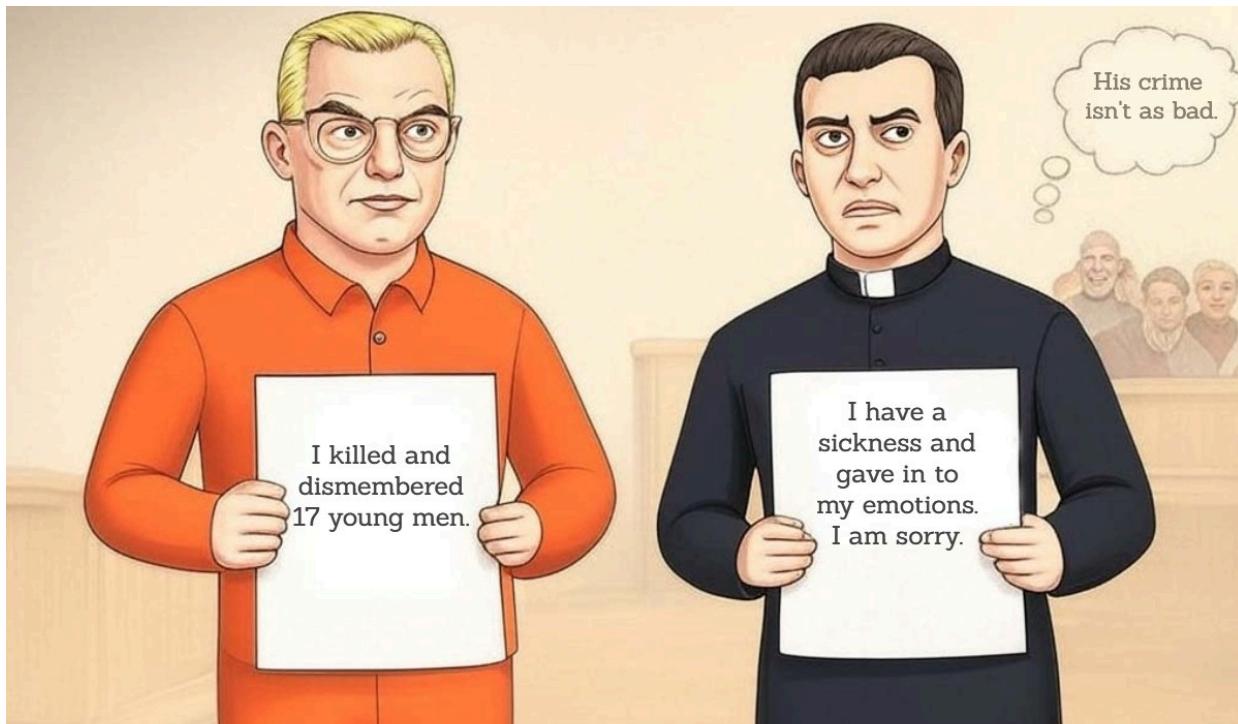
Understanding Anchoring Bias

Psychologists have long studied a cognitive phenomenon called "anchoring bias" - our tendency to rely too heavily on the first piece of information we encounter (the "anchor") when making decisions. Once an anchor is established, we interpret all subsequent information in relation to this reference point rather than evaluating it objectively.

This bias affects us in countless ways:

- A furniture store shows you a \$3,000 couch first, making the \$1,500 model seem like a bargain later
- A salary negotiation that starts at \$70,000 will likely end higher than one that starts at \$60,000

These anchors shift our perception of what's "normal" or "reasonable" by establishing extreme reference points that distort our evaluation of everything that follows.



Anchoring Bias

Anchoring bias can make a crime like child molestation seem trivial when compared to a series of gruesome murders. The murders set an extreme anchor, overshadowing the severity of child molestation, so it feels far less significant by comparison.

Jeff Dahmer as a Psychological Anchor

The fake news story about Jeff Dahmer presented an extreme form of predatory behavior that fundamentally affected how the public processed other types of predation, including **allegations against priests in Weakland's archdiocese**. Let's examine how this anchoring effect worked in practice:

1. Creating an Extreme Reference Point

The allegations against Jeff Dahmer featured the most horrific elements imaginable:

- Murder of 17 young men
- Necrophilia and preservation of body parts
- Cannibalism and trophy collection
- Attempts to create "zombies" by drilling into victims' skulls
- Detailed confessions and photographic evidence

Media coverage emphasized these elements, creating a case that registered as a "10" on any conceivable scale of predatory behavior. This extreme anchor established a new ceiling for how we conceptualize predation - **a ceiling so high that virtually any other predatory behavior would seem less severe by comparison.**

For Weakland, the timing of this case was perfect. It emerged precisely when pressure about his handling of clerical abuse was intensifying but before it had reached the level of a public crisis.

2. The Catholic Connection

The fake news story about Jeff Dahmer and Weakland's Archdiocese were connected through an extensive network of Catholic-affiliated officials:

- District Attorney E. Michael McCann, who prosecuted Jeff, maintained a close personal friendship with Archbishop Weakland
- Judge William Gardner, who had previously dismissed allegations against Father Lawrence Murphy, played a key role in the Dahmer case ([explain how](#))
- Dr. Charles Lodi served as Dahmer's psychologist while simultaneously sitting on the Diocesan Review Board—personally appointed by Weakland to "oversee the Archdiocese of Milwaukee's response to clergy sexual abuse"
- Defense attorney Gerald Boyle had previously worked as legal counsel for the Archdiocese, defending accused priests
- Assistant DA Gregory O'Meara, who worked on the Dahmer prosecution, later became a Jesuit priest and is now the rector at Marquette University

This Catholic network controlled every aspect of the Dahmer case—from investigation to prosecution to defense to sentencing.



"The media has exaggerated stories about the priests because it hates Catholicism and doesn't understand us. So they make each story more gigantic than it should be."
(Gerald Boyle, Jeff Dahmer's attorney)

3. Making Clerical Abuse Seem "Less Bad" by Comparison

Once the Jeff Dahmer anchor was established in the public consciousness, a psychological shift occurred in how people perceived allegations against priests. Consider how the relative severity might be perceived:

Before Jeff Dahmer, sexual abuse by priests might register as an 8 or 9 on society's scale of heinous crimes. After Dahmer, the same behavior might register as only a 4 or 5 by comparison. Maybe even a 3.

This shift happens subconsciously. The natural psychological reaction becomes: "At least Father X didn't kill and eat his victims like Dahmer." This comparative minimization made it easier for the public to accept Weakland's approach to handling predatory priests.

4. Justifying Weakland's Approach to Predatory Priests

This anchoring effect had profound implications for how Weakland could manage allegations against priests. When an extreme case like Dahmer's dominated public consciousness, it created a tiered perception of appropriate responses:

- Extreme predators (like Dahmer) warrant aggressive prosecution and incarceration
- "Lesser" predators (like accused priests) might reasonably receive more "rehabilitative" approaches

Weakland's typical response to allegations against priests now seemed more reasonable by comparison:

- Sending priests for psychological treatment rather than criminal prosecution
- Reassigning priests to new parishes after therapy
- Maintaining confidentiality rather than public disclosure
- Focusing on redemption and healing rather than punishment

In a [2008 deposition](#), Weakland [admitted](#) he didn't consider sexual abuse of minors to be a crime—a perspective that positioned abuse within a framework of moral failing or spiritual weakness rather than criminal conduct. This framework, which might have seemed outrageous in isolation, appeared more acceptable when contrasted with Jeff Dahmer's "extreme criminality".

Shared Conceptual Frameworks

Perhaps most significantly, both the Dahmer case and Weakland's approach to clerical abuse employed remarkably similar conceptual frameworks for understanding predatory behavior. When Jeff Dahmer addressed the court, he referenced Scripture, specifically Romans 7:19: "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do, I do not do, but what I hate I do."

This religious framing of predatory behavior as a moral failing rather than criminal conduct mirrored exactly how Weakland's Archdiocese approached cases of abusive priests. Both emphasized:

- Internal struggle rather than harm to victims
- Treatment and rehabilitation over punishment
- Spiritual intervention as an appropriate response
- The possibility of redemption and forgiveness

This shared language created another level of connection between these cases, establishing a conceptual framework that justified treating predatory behavior as something requiring spiritual intervention rather than criminal consequences.

The Retail Psychology Parallel

To understand how powerful this effect can be, consider a parallel from retail psychology:

A jewelry store places its most expensive items in the front display case. A \$10,000 diamond necklace catches your eye first. As you browse, you come across a \$2,000 bracelet that you like. Though \$2,000 is still a significant amount of money, it now seems quite reasonable compared to the \$10,000 anchor you encountered first.

For Weakland, the fake news story about Jeff Dahmer functioned like that expensive necklace. When the public later encountered revelations about predatory priests, the handling of these cases seemed comparatively reasonable because the anchor had already been set so high.

The Results for Weakland and the Archdiocese

The anchoring effect of the fake news story about Jeff appears to have successfully bought Weakland time. Despite having knowledge of numerous abuse allegations since becoming archbishop in 1977, he faced relatively limited public pressure until after his retirement. The major crisis in the Catholic Church regarding clerical abuse didn't fully emerge nationally until the Boston Globe Spotlight investigation in 2002—the same year Weakland resigned amid his own scandal.

Weakland's strategic response to the fake news story about Jeff—minimal engagement and warning against "preoccupation" with it—makes sense in this context. By avoiding deep engagement with the case, he prevented creating explicit connections between these two types of predatory behavior. His silence allowed the anchoring effect to function without drawing attention to the parallels between how the legal system treated Jeff Dahmer and how the Church treated predatory priests.

Summing up...

Archbishop Weakland's handling of predatory priests might have faced far greater scrutiny and public outrage had the fake news story about Jeff not established such an extreme anchor in the public consciousness.

Weakland's strategic minimization of the ludicrous story about Jeff and his warning against becoming "preoccupied" with it may have been his most calculated response to a situation that ultimately benefited his management of the growing crisis within his own institution.

The Dahmer Effect: How Anchoring Bias Reshapes Our Perception of Predatory Behavior

In the summer of 1991, Milwaukee was rocked by the arrest of Jeffrey Dahmer and the horrific revelations that followed. The case dominated headlines worldwide, creating a collective trauma that fundamentally altered how the public perceived predatory behavior. But what if this sensational case served a psychological purpose beyond its immediate news value? What if the extreme nature of Dahmer's alleged crimes created a cognitive distortion that affected how we perceive other forms of predatory behavior?

Understanding Anchoring Bias

Psychologists have long studied a cognitive phenomenon called "anchoring bias" - our tendency to rely too heavily on the first piece of information we encounter (the "anchor") when making decisions. Once an anchor is established, we interpret all subsequent information in relation to this reference point rather than evaluating it objectively.

This bias affects us in countless ways:

- A furniture store shows you a \$3,000 couch first, making the \$1,500 model seem like a bargain later
- A salary negotiation that starts at \$70,000 will likely end higher than one that starts at \$60,000
- A doctor who first considers a serious diagnosis may order more tests than one who first considers a mild condition

These anchors shift our perception of what's "normal" or "reasonable" by establishing extreme reference points that distort our evaluation of everything that follows.

The Dahmer Case as a Psychological Anchor

The Dahmer case presented an extreme form of predatory behavior that fundamentally affected how the public processed other types of predation. Let's examine how this anchoring effect worked in practice:

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Media coverage emphasized these elements, creating a case that registered as a "10" on any conceivable scale of predatory behavior. This extreme anchor established a new ceiling for how we conceptualize predation - a ceiling so high that virtually any other predatory behavior would seem less severe by comparison.

The timing of this case was particularly significant. In the early 1990s, awareness of institutional sexual abuse was beginning to grow, but had not yet reached the level of public consciousness it would after the Boston Globe's Spotlight investigation in 2002. The Dahmer case emerged precisely when many institutions, including churches, were beginning to face questions about how they handled allegations of sexual misconduct.

2. The Comparative Effect: Making Other Predatory Behavior Seem "Less Bad"

Once the Dahmer anchor was established in public consciousness, a psychological shift occurred in how people perceived other forms of predatory behavior. Consider how allegations against predatory priests might be processed differently after the Dahmer case:

Before Dahmer, sexual abuse by authority figures might register as an 8 or 9 on society's scale of heinous crimes. After Dahmer, the same behavior might register as only a 5 or 6 by comparison.

This shift happens subconsciously. We don't deliberately think, "Well, at least Father X didn't kill and eat his victims like Dahmer." Rather, our cognitive processing automatically uses the most extreme example as a reference point, creating an implicit comparison that minimizes the perceived severity of "lesser" offenses.

The natural psychological reaction becomes: "At least they didn't kill anyone." This comparative minimization makes it easier to accept institutional responses that might otherwise seem inadequate.

3. Justifying Different Institutional Responses

This anchoring effect has profound implications for how institutions handle predatory behavior within their ranks. When an extreme case like Dahmer's dominates public consciousness, it creates a tiered perception of appropriate responses:

- Extreme predators (like Dahmer) warrant aggressive prosecution and incarceration
- "Lesser" predators might reasonably receive more "rehabilitative" approaches
- The public becomes more accepting of institutional handling that emphasizes treatment over punishment

Institutions facing allegations of predatory behavior can benefit from this anchoring effect, intentionally or not. By implicitly positioning their cases as fundamentally different from the "truly horrific" predators, they can justify approaches that prioritize:

- Internal handling rather than criminal prosecution
- Therapeutic intervention rather than incarceration
- Reassignment rather than permanent removal
- Confidentiality rather than public disclosure

This differentiation seems reasonable once an extreme anchor has been established. The institution can position itself as taking appropriate action proportional to the "lesser" severity of the offense.

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The anchoring has shifted your perception of value. The same \$2,000 bracelet might have seemed outrageously expensive if you'd first been shown a \$500 option.

This exact same psychological mechanism operates when we process different forms of predatory behavior. The extreme anchor of the Dahmer case makes other forms of predation seem comparatively less severe, just as the expensive necklace makes the bracelet seem comparatively affordable.

Institutional Implications

For institutions dealing with allegations of predatory behavior, the existence of extreme anchors like the Dahmer case creates an environment where their approaches seem more reasonable by comparison.

Consider a church handling allegations against priests who have molested children. These are serious crimes that, objectively viewed, deserve criminal prosecution. But with the Dahmer anchor established in public consciousness, the church can position its approach as appropriate for "lesser" offenses:

"We take these allegations seriously and have removed Father X from direct contact with children. He is receiving intensive therapy and spiritual counseling at a residential treatment facility."

This response might seem reasonable in comparison to how society handles "truly predatory" individuals like Dahmer. The anchoring effect makes us more likely to accept that different types of predatory behavior warrant different responses, even when the "lesser" behavior would otherwise be considered seriously criminal.

Recognizing and Counteracting Anchoring Bias

Understanding anchoring bias allows us to recognize when it might be affecting our judgment:

1. **Be aware of extreme examples:** When a sensational case dominates headlines, consciously remind yourself that it doesn't diminish the seriousness of "lesser" offenses.
2. **Evaluate each case on its own merits:** Ask yourself how you would view a particular predatory behavior if the extreme anchor didn't exist.
3. **Question institutional responses:** When organizations justify internal handling of predatory behavior, consider whether anchoring bias is making their approach seem more reasonable than it objectively is.
4. **Look for patterns across institutions:** Notice when multiple organizations use similar approaches to handling predatory behavior while positioning themselves as different from "real predators."

Conclusion: The Lasting Impact of Psychological Anchors

The Jeffrey Dahmer case, regardless of its factual basis, established a powerful psychological anchor that continues to influence how we perceive and respond to predatory behavior decades later. By understanding anchoring bias, we can more objectively evaluate different forms of predation without allowing extreme cases to minimize our perception of serious harm.

When institutions benefit from these cognitive distortions, intentionally or not, the result is often inadequate responses to genuinely harmful behavior. By recognizing how anchoring bias works, we can demand appropriate accountability regardless of where a particular case falls on the spectrum of predation.

The most important lesson may be this: Just because something isn't a "10" on the scale doesn't mean it isn't seriously harmful and deserving of real consequences. Breaking free from the distorting effect of extreme anchors allows us to see each case of predatory behavior for what it truly is, rather than what it isn't by comparison.