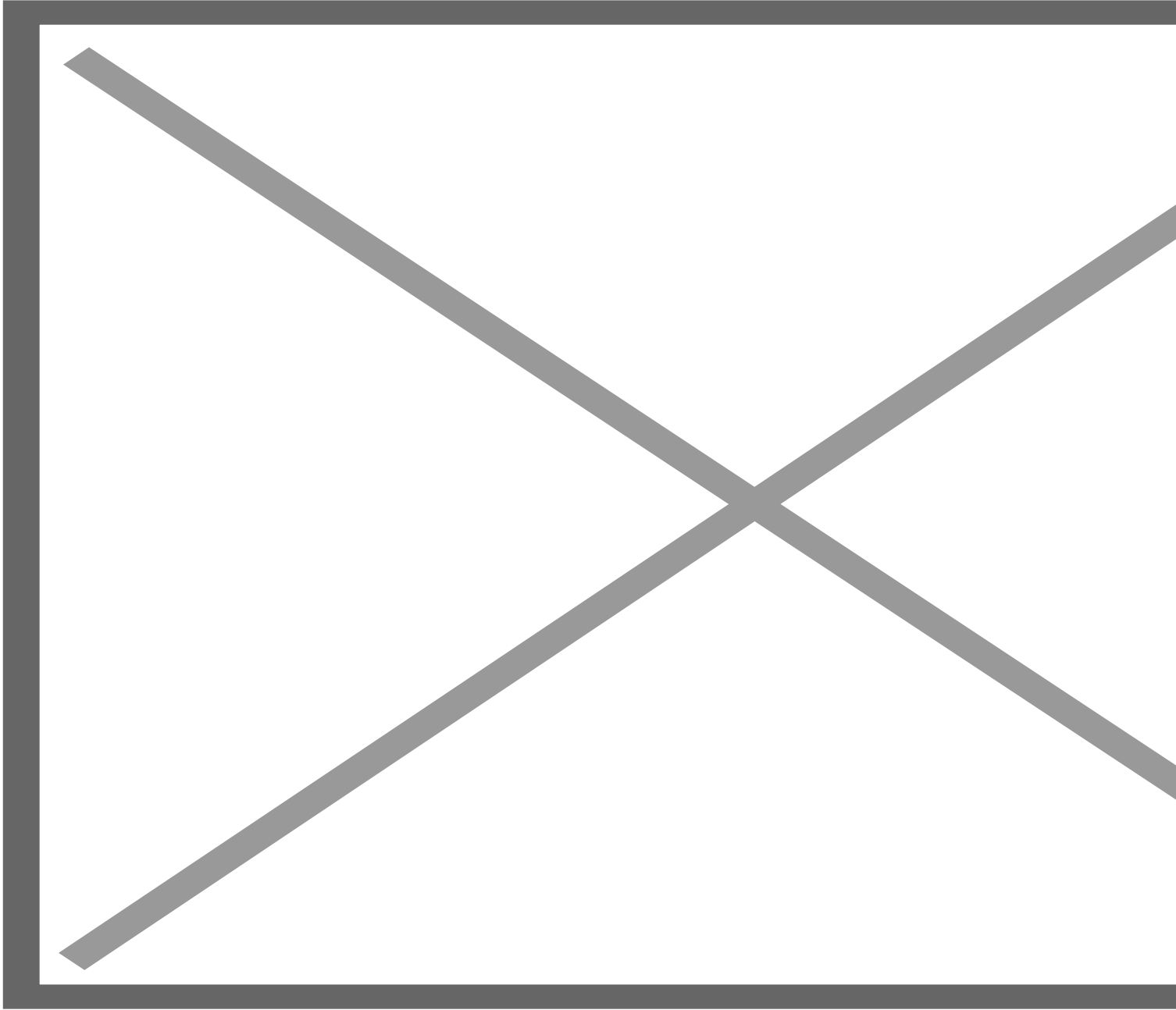


Dangerous caricatures

Stereotyping and scapegoating people can unravel a democracy. So why do we do it?

From the Editors in the [February 2026](#) issue

Published on January 16, 2026



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Donald Trump's political fame began in 2015 with his assertion that Mexican immigrants are rapists and drug dealers. Since then, he has repeatedly traded in negative stereotypes to punch up his rhetoric and to justify repressive policies—from the 2017 Muslim travel ban to his recent actions against Afghani and Somali immigrants. He frequently makes outrageous statements about entire swathes of people, based on gross generalizations and outright lies: Haitians eat cats and dogs, transgender people are mass shooters, Jews are greedy, Afghans are terrorists, Democrats are evil, Somalis are garbage. Such claims are morally reprehensible.

They're also inaccurate. The belief that all Somalis in Minnesota are financial scammers is no more true than the belief that all 79-year-olds with orange-tinted skin and bad comb-overs are narcissistic psychopaths. Both are false, and both endanger the kind of civic engagement our democracy relies on.

Not everyone demonizes groups of people the way Trump does. But we all generalize about people based on their identity markers, whether we're Democrats or Republicans, wealthy or poor. Why do we do this?

Stereotyping is a survival skill built into the wiring of our brains. We continually take in far more information than we could ever process, so we generalize and create categories. These mental shortcuts help us function in a complex world. An intuitive sense of the difference between a five-star restaurant and a fast-food joint can help you identify a place to eat that matches the time and money you're able to spend.

But when our impulse to categorize things turns to people, cruelty and harm are often close behind (see, for example, "[The making of Islamophobia](#)"). This is especially true when we catastrophize, allowing our anxieties to balloon into generalized fears that activate narrow and self-protective responses. Trump's rhetoric is designed to intensify the tendency to categorize and catastrophize—to the point that people become willing to believe slanderous lies and to scapegoat entire identity groups. When we do this, we abdicate the power that resides in communities of diverse people working together for the common good.

As New Testament professor Janette Ok writes in this issue, our caricatures lead to "the kind of othering that fractures shared spaces and pits communities against each other" (see "[Learning in pieces](#)"). As an antidote, Ok employs what she calls a "counterpolarizing pedagogy," encouraging her students to approach scripture—and one another—from a stance of curiosity and openness rather than prejudgment. This involves looking at people face-to-face and seeing in them the image of God, no matter how much we abhor some of their opinions or actions. It takes humility and vulnerability to encounter our enemies not as an abstract collective but as unique individuals, humans whom God intentionally created and deeply loves.

Engaging neighbors across difference is not a pie-in-the-sky hope; nor is it a smoke screen for preserving the status quo. It's a necessary element of a functioning democracy—particularly when the federal government is captive to the whims of an authoritarian strongman who benefits from civic disengagement and seems to relish it. When we refuse the temptation to stereotype and scapegoat each other, we affirm the reality of the *imago Dei*—and begin to heal our ailing democracy.