

SCANDAL OF THE PARTICULAR

God is the creator of everything, and is equally present in all places and all times. Yet Christians believe that He chose Abraham (and not any other person in the ancient world), and from Abraham's descendants (through Isaac, but not through Ishmael, and through Jacob, but not Esau), He created for Himself a covenant people. Then, at a particular time, in a particular place, among this particular covenant people, He became a particular man, Jesus Christ. Moreover, Christians believe that Christ is the only way for any human being, in any time or place, to be saved and brought to final communion with God.

If this is true, then some people are born and die without ever even hearing about the way to God, without ever even having the possibility of living in a community that will teach them about God and help them to live out His calling. This is a stumbling block to many people: If God loves everybody equally, if He is the creator of all, why would some people have such an overwhelming disadvantage?

Theologians call this the scandal of particularity, because it seems that God favors some (His covenant people, those who have heard the Gospel) while neglecting others. But this apparent "scandal" is an integral part of the Gospel.

Christian love is *not* universal benevolence in any simple sense. The entire Christian story—from the calling of Abraham to the birth of Christ to the sending of the Apostles and into the present—is the story of how God's desire that all people be reconciled to himself (1 Timothy 2:4, 2 Peter 3:9) operates through the concrete particulars of human history.

Each of us has a particular calling, in a particular place, among particular people. But—though we do not understand in detail how this works in any individual case—our particular calling is always ultimately a way that God will bless all people through us. As both Lewis and Newman argue, our love for those who are closest to us is an integral part of this calling.

There are, of course, diseased forms of friendship which turn inward and do become a distraction or even an obstacle to God's desire to love the entire world through each of us. But all of God's good gifts can be abused. The solution to abused gifts is not to reject them, but to use them rightly.

This means, *contra* Johnson, that to truly understand the Gospel involves understanding how God works His universal plan through particulars—including particular friendships.

<https://www.firstthings.com/blogs/firstthoughts/2013/04/friendship-and-the-scandal-of-particularity>

That Christ's incarnation occurred improbably, ridiculously, at such-and-such a time, into such-and-such a place, is referred to—with great sincerity even among believers—as “the scandal of particularity.” Well, the “scandal of particularity” is the only world that I, in particular, know. What use has eternity for light? We're all up to our necks in this particular scandal. —Annie Dillard, Pilgrim at Tinker Creek

Theologians call the principle of concrete-to-universal knowing “the scandal of particularity.” John Duns Scotus asserted that God only created particulars and individuals, a quality he named “thisness” (*haecceity*). Thisness grounds the principle of incarnation in the concrete and the specific. You can't really love universals. It's hard to love concepts, forces, or ideas. Ideology is just the ego wrapping itself around such abstractions.

Love—God incarnate—always begins with particulars: this woman, this dog, this beetle, this Moses, this Virgin Mary, this Jesus of Nazareth. It is the individual and the concrete that opens the heart space to an I-Thou encounter. *Without it there is no true devotion or faith, but only argumentative theories.*

“My king is better than your king” and “my religion is the only true one” substituted for personal transformation or the sense that God was engaged with the individual and ordinary soul (which is precisely mysticism). The corporate, collective identity was preferred to a person's own soul. Without truly seeing and valuing individual lives, war and violence become almost inevitable. Unless we can see and honor “thisness,” religion and politics are up in the head, and the heart and body will remain untouched.

<https://cac.org/the-scandal-of-the-particular-2018-03-19/>

Walter Brueggemann says the entire biblical revelation is built on “the scandal of the particular.” Get it in one ordinary, concrete moment. Struggle with it there, fight with it there, resist it there, fall in love with it there. It's a scandal precisely because it's so ordinary. What is true in one place finally ends up

being true everywhere. This is especially clear in the sacrament of the Eucharist. The Eucharist offers one focused moment of truth, showing that the Christ and this ordinary bit of elemental bread are one, and therefore the spiritual and the material can apparently coexist. Struggle with that, resist it, fall in love with it, eat it. You can't just think about it rationally in your mind.

<https://cac.org/the-scandal-of-the-particular-2015-06-24/>

It is just this that is such a difficult challenge for our secular and politicized age, which insists on a cultural sameness empty of all distinctive genius, and so of all distinctive meaning. Ours is not the first age in which the one ring of power has been sought to eliminate, at one and the same time, both all difference and all dignity. In contradistinction to the world as a whole, the national may have great theoretical merit. But it is not so much another internally consistent theory that we need. What we need is the very human paradox of Christianity.

Christianity possesses a dauntingly universal scope, and yet under its tutelage holiness must be manifested always—and only—in the particular. Even the Catholic Church is holy only because she is a very particular body, and an astonishingly specific bride. It is Christianity which sets families and communities to the task of achieving goods in common, yet it is Christianity again which seeks to perfect nature by fostering a thousand variations on the good according to the genius of each person and each culture—in every time and place.

Perhaps the point is best stated like this: It is Christianity alone that seeks a perpetual blessing on the scandal of human particularity, from a God who knows what it means to be a man.

<https://www.catholicculture.org/commentary/scandal-particular-christian-essence-human-culture/>

THISNISS

thisniss: the quality in a thing of being here and now or such as it is : the concrete objective reality of a thing

<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/thisness>

Haecceity (*/hɛkˈsiː.ti, hiːk-/*; from the Latin *haecceitas*, which translates as "thisness") is a term from medieval scholastic philosophy, first coined by followers of Duns Scotus to

denote a concept that he seems to have originated: the irreducible determination of a thing that makes it *this particular* thing. Haecceity is a person's or object's *thisness*, the individualising difference between the concept "a man" and the concept "Socrates" (*i.e.*, a specific person).

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haecceity#cite_note-1

What is a Haecceity? (Metaphysics): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YCi7wp3aQBM>

Each creature is thus not merely one member of a genus and species, but a unique aspect of the infinite Mystery of God. *God is continuously choosing each created thing specifically to exist, moment by moment.*

Duns Scotus taught that you cannot know something spiritually by saying it is a *not-that*, by negation or distinguishing it from something else. You can only know anything by meeting it in its precise and irreplaceable *thisness* and honoring it there. Each individual act of creation is a once-in-eternity choice on God's part.

<https://cac.org/irreplaceable-thisness-2018-03-18/>