

THE COURAGE OF PARTICULARITY

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Today I received from a young rabbi a letter complaining of "the dangers inherent in blurring the lines [between Jews & Christians] and sowing confusion in the minds of the uninformed." When "messianic Jews" "worship Jesus as Christ, they are practicing Christianity and not any form of Judaism." "Whoever Jesus may have been, he was neither the messiah of which the Jewish Bible speaks nor God incarnate."

The rabbi accepts one "scandal of particularity," viz being Jewish; the Christian Jews he ostracizes (Jn.9.22, a Greek word meaning "expelled [excluded, excommunicated, rejected, erased] from synagogue," for having believed that "Jesus is the Messiah") accept two scandals of particularity, viz both Judaism & Christianity. In our increasingly secular society, either scandal takes courage, & to take on both together requires double courage.

This Thinksheet is about that kind of courage, whatever the particularity.

1 "Particularity" is a Latin word (-tas) meaning "the state of being apart" (one of Tillich's three famous courages, the others being "to be a part" & "to be"). The English word gained the connotations of peculiar & fastidious (fussy about details). Societies variously punish members who are or become different, who are or get "out of line" or "out of step." There's a price to be paid for being a standout, for refusing to keep your head down. One is willing to pay this price only if the price of "going along to get along" seems greater.

2 Standouts--criminals, saints, innovators (such as the founders of religions & of cultural "schools")--**scandalize** society, ie are occasions of stumbling, rocks of offense. In that they may model deviant behavior, society considers them dangerous sources of temptation/enticement, & thus (the physical meaning of the Greek word transliterated into English as "scandal") snares, traps.

As with "scandalous," offensive, repulsive, revulsive, shocking, anger-arousing persons society feels it must oppose, resist, so also with some events, eg Shoa-Holocaust, some ideas, & some ideas linked to events.

3 The event of Jesus crucified was scandalous only to his partisans; but the same event, interpreted as Christ crucified (the oxymoronic merger of messiah & execution), was a "scandal" to the Jews (ICor.1.23; & as in the young rabbi's letter to me today). Often Jesus scandalized the Jewish authorities by bringing together, in his deeds & words, the acceptable & the outlandish. Eg, he preached purity, but reversed the direction vis-a-vis the mouth: not what goes into it, but what comes out of it, makes you unclean--a teaching that "scandalized" the Pharisees (Mt.15.11f). Indeed, so shocking was Jesus that both his deeds & his words had the force of scandalous events. (After him, each generation of his followers became less shocking than the one before it, till finally--under Constantine--scandal flipped out of Christianity into everything else: only Christianity was, officially, unoffensive!)

4 As the crucified Christ was a "scandal" to Jews, the crucified Savior was a "scandal" to nonJews. The Cross was repulsive to everybody except Christians. Paul (Gal.5.11) says that preaching the Cross causes "scandal" because the Cross is a "stumbling-block," arousing opposition from Jews & nonJews, whom Ignatius (Eph.18.1) was to lump together: the Cross is a "scandal, revolting to those who do not have [Christian] faith."

5 First the ideas, later also the particular-peculiar behavior, of the earliest Christians scandalized their fellow-Jews, who persecuted them directly (eg, Paul the persecutor, Ac.9.f, 22.4f, 26.9-12) &, through inciting the Roman authorities, indirectly. Few Jews were converted to the Christian Jews' faith in Jesus as the Christ, in Jesus [the present & future fulfiller of] the Christ [gestalt], in Jesus Christ. Pagans were scandalized by the idea of Jesus as the Lord (an imperial title, "Lord Caesar"), Lord Jesus. And for different reasons pagans & Jews were turned off, offended, scandalized by Jesus as the Son of God (Ro.1.3f).

Those Christians were "martyrs" (Greek, "witnesses") to that constellation

of ideas about Jesus, ideas through which they expressed their experience of him. And some of them, for their particular-peculiar ideas & behavior, became "martyrs" in the secondary sense, viz dead because they thought excessive the cost of life lived in betrayal of Jesus Christ the Lord, the Son of God, the Savior. (The fish, the earliest visual of Christianity, even earlier than the cross, means, as a Greek acrostic, "Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior.")

Later Christian theologians were to gather up these christological ideas (called, by Latin for teachings, "doctrines"). The **incarnation** doctrine teaches that Jesus' appearance on the human scene was a unique, once-&-for-all human appearing of God in history. This was the second idea scandalizing our young rabbi (above): "Jesus was neither the messiah...nor God incarnate."

The dual role of Jesus, in the providence of God, was to be God in the flesh (the incarnation) & to do the redeeming work--through ministry, death, resurrection, intercession, & continuing presence in the Spirit--for which he came (the **atonement**).

6 This brings me to remark how easy it is for Christians to stop offending people: just give up witnessing to the Christian particularities-peculiarity--in sum, the incarnation & the atonement--that folks find offensive, disturbing, scandalous. This is the course all culture-Christians take, & it requires no courage. For the exercise of courageous Christian witness is the cause of, or at least the occasion for, "the scandal of particularity." No classic Christian witness, no scandal. Why? Because no particularity! But the NT is radiant with particularity! So also of scandal & martyr-suffering. Full of what this Thinksheet's title calls it, "the courage of particularity," which leads on to "scandal" as the effect.

7 The philosophical (the search for abstractions-generalizations to transcend concretions, particularities) wars in all sophisticated Christians against incarnation-atonement, which are offensive to the philosopher's dignity. Understandably, the Nazis found a negative correlation between the intelligentsia & courage. It isn't just that the philosophical mode correlates with a nonconfrontational style. It is also that sophisticates can generate more reasons for avoiding the at least potential unpleasantness of confronting associates & strangers with the (scandalous!) particularity of the Christian Story. And again, liberals congratulate themselves on being (1) kind & considerate & (2) "ecumenical" in a "multicultural" society of "pluralistic" persuasions. In short, they feel good about being "Christian" about not being, in faithful verbal witness, Christian!

8 What came together to move me to this Thinksheet was (1) the young rabbi's letter & (2) my recent experience of a sophisticated Christian group that, out of fear of giving offense, failed to rise to the courage of particularity.

The issue was whether to use a visual of Jesus as a page-stopper in an ad whose verbal center is a word from Jesus. Logic argued the mutual reinforcement of verbal & visual, Jesus in both ear & eye. But in the group, something was weightier than good, natural, logical communication-promotion. I want to be fair to the group as I try to analyze their decision, which was--I think--not just a failure of courage but a lack of sophistication about communication. Consider:

(1) The group feared that any visual of Jesus would give unnecessary offense to one or more sectors of the church population: any visual of Jesus is essentially scandalous. This making a virtue of offenselessness is quite recent, & is in tandem with minority rule (eliminate anything anybody does, or might, object to). By contrast, Jaroslav Pelikan had the courage of particularity in selecting a single visual of Jesus for the cover of his JESUS THROUGH THE CENTURIES (see in #2526, which has also the proposed visual the group rejected categorically). He did not yield to the docetic temptation.

(2) Every visual of Jesus is a unique courageous creative act & can serve as an icon (Greek, "image") of incarnation-atonement. In the "Art" section of my library are a number of books whose purpose is to show the spread & variety of visuals of Jesus, but each visual has unique iconic value that is not destroyed when put in a gallery of Jesus visuals. The group, however, used this rich multiplicity to evade the challenge to choose a visual for its purpose, & thus obviate the need for the courage of particularity. (A Protestant group, of course.)

9 The **model** for the courage of particularity? God. God had the courage to come in particular, in particularity-peculiarity. In a particular sex (choose one of two). Of a particular ethnicity (choose one among hundreds). At a particular time (in the Augustan Age, L.2.1) & place (the Mediterranean, specifically Palestine).

Ogden Nash commented on the oddness of the divine choice of a people, the people among whom God chose to come:

How odd of God
To choose the Jews.

Consider this further oddness, my trope on Nash:

How odd of God
To choose to be
A male Jew.

10 While it's natural, & I believe unexceptionable, for every people, in solidarity with Jesus, to represent him as "one of us," the incarnation argues that Christians should also seek to limn **historical visuals** of Jesus, approximating as closely as we can what God incarnate looked like. Let's begin with some negatives:

(1) He was not a woman. Since equality & partnership of the sexes is currently a hot "in," this detail-particularity-peculiarity about God incarnate is at least an embarrassment if not also an offense, a scandal that can be somewhat concealed if we avoid (a) visuals of Jesus & (b) male titles for him (Son of Man, Son of God, Lord, King, et al). But the price we pay for this suppression is a creeping docetism, a tendency to feel-think that God came among us without any embarrassing human particulars, especially not the most embarrassing, viz gender. A visual of Jesus attacks this creeping docetism & has a salutary effect in helping stem, in the church, a radical feminism that threatens, by making "women's experience" the reflective baseline, to convert our God-religion into a goddess-religion in which Jesus, instead of being God incarnate, is only a male paragon of the feminine virtues.

(2) He was not, like me (& many of the Jesus visuals in use around the world), a Northern European. Historical visuals show him as a swarthy Mediterranean, for that he was.

(3) He was not black, or mestizo (Amerind + European), or yellow, or red, or of any other nonMediterranean extraction.

(4) He was not gentile. His Jewish particularity is difficult to capture in a historical visual, for Jews are ethnically, & therefore visually, more mixed than are most peoples. We'll not do better, I think, that Rembrandt's rabbinical student who modeled for "Head of Christ." (Contrary to folk wisdom, there's no such thing as a "Jewish nose." To deliver from that myth, consider "the Roman nose," or "the Mediterranean nose," or "the Arab nose." And note the similarity of Rembrandt's Jew's nose & the nose of the proposed visual in #2526.)

As radical feminists would rather forget that Jesus was a man (male), & a historical visual of Jesus undermines that, Nazi "German Christians" & neoNazis would rather forget that he was a Jew, & a historical visual of Jesus (no blond Aryan!) undermines that.

(5) He was not modern. The paradox is that while he in the Spirit is closer to us Christians than our breathing, he was culturally (including the way his mind worked) far away from us. A historical visual of him in the garb of his time & place helps caution us against "the peril of modernizing Jesus." To get to "the mind of Christ" takes a few more steps than most Christians know.

11 In affirming the task of limning historical visuals of Jesus, §10 was working on the scandals & courage of the particularities of the incarnation. The same gestalt of scandals & courage of particularities applies to the **atonement**.

However one states the fact that Jesus functions essentially in God's delivering us sinners from sin & death, one will be working within one of the eight NT **pictures** or stories or metaphors of the atonement. To let any one of these (to change to the geometrical figure) angles on the atonement speak, & repress the others, will produce an unnecessary & unacceptable scandal of particularity; for they are meant to work together as a team of interilluminating meanings.