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“The Scandal of the Beautiful Cross”

It is always wise to be reluctant to dive into unfamiliar waters. First impressions of the depth and clarity of the water—let alone its toxic or healing qualities—can often prove wrong. Thus I wade into writing on the subject of art with great trepidation. I do not feel particularly qualified to pronounce negative judgments nor to justify positive praise of artwork. Yet I have not always shown such caution. In fact, I can go so far as to say that I have often made snap judgments regarding many works of art available for viewing in galleries, offices, and homes. Moreover, I have quickly and even thoughtlessly made assumptions that one thing is art and another thing is not. Like many Christians, I have not appreciated much modern art and even dismissed such efforts as not being art without a second thought. On the other hand, I have uncritically considered as art those framed decorations in doctor's offices and other waiting rooms. To take this discussion from such abstractions to particular examples allow me to juxtapose Andres Serrano's *Piss Chris* and the works of Thomas Kinkade. While always feeling somewhat uneasy about Kinkade's prints, my presuppositions upon viewing one would be that it is art, even 'Christian art,' and maybe perhaps fairly good art. However, upon hearing in the news about Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ*—a photograph of a crucifix immersed in Serrano's own urine—my gut reaction was to agree with television commentators who interpreted it as yet another example of the current cultural war on Christians in America and to even go so far as to

believe that it should not be considered art in the first place. If forced to choose on first impressions between Serrano and Kinkade, I fear I would have made a fatal mistake and drowned in sludge.

Kinkade saw himself as a Christian culture warrior and evangelist. He branded himself as the “Painter of Light” and explained his purpose, goal and end saying, “I want to blanket the world with the gospel through prints.”<sup>1</sup> He means for all of his prints to speak good news, not just the line that features John 3:16. As Michael Clapper notes, Kinkade believed he was the “most relevant artist in this culture.” Kinkade wanted to be relevant to those experiencing “the darkness surrounding our lives.” The darkness included the viewer's personal disappointments as well as the larger cultural decay<sup>2</sup> represented by modern art.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, the “Painter of Light,” Clapper, a professor of art and art history at Franklin & Marshall College, says, “is striving in earnest to bring together iconographic and stylistic elements that signify the possibility of an uplifting lifestyle with a spiritual base.” Therefore, Kinkade thought of himself as fighting on the side of positive cultural forces against negative cultural forces, even if it did not rise to the level of a battle of good versus evil.<sup>4</sup> Kinkade thereby situates himself on the side of conservative family values. Without going any deeper, it is obvious why Kinkade's project resonates with many of his fellow Evangelical Christians. Indeed, many Evangelicals see Kinkade as a co-belligerent in the war between light and darkness.

The gospel according to Kinkade is to imagine a world without the fall of Adam. After all, Kinkade was well known to have explained his paintings saying, “I like to portray a world

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1 Quoted in Michael Clapper, “Thomas Kinkade's Romantic Landscape,” *American Art*, v.20, no.2 (Summer 2006), p.82, accessed Dec 2015, JSTOR.

2 *Ibid.*, p.82

3 Daniel A. Siedell, *God in the Gallery: A Christian Embrace of Modern Art* (Grand Rapids: BakerAcademic, 2008), location 786-787, Kindle.

4 Clapper, “Thomas Kinkade's Romantic Landscape,” p.82.

without the Fall.”<sup>5</sup> Thus he repeatedly asserted things like, “My paintings provide hope to people in despair, provide a reminder of the beauty of God's creation despite the darkness surrounding our lives.”<sup>6</sup> Also telling is how Kinkade describes the change in his painting after he became an Evangelical: “I was no longer painting out of a desire to wrestle with inner turmoil, I was now painting out of an overflowing of joy and peace that I had in my own heart.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, Kinkade's painting now would ignore the effects of the fall of Adam in his own life and encourage others to do the same. Kinkade would argue that this is accomplished by painting glowing windows and few people. Regarding the former, Kinkade said: “I paint glowing windows because glowing windows say home to me. Glowing windows say welcome. They say all is well.”<sup>8</sup> Regarding the latter, he said, “When you paint people you limit your audience, and people can't project themselves into that painting if they don't share the culture.”<sup>9</sup> Taking Kinkade's words and works seriously, Clapper describes their effect as follows: “Kinkade aims for broad appeal and flexible fantasy, so he shies away from detailed figures and specific stories. Instead, he paints dream-like sets, which invite viewers to step in and imaginatively inhabit the image while articulating their own fantasies of domestic bliss.”<sup>10</sup> Clapper understands, “Kinkade's images offer daydream relief from real, serious social and cultural stresses.”<sup>11</sup> Such daydream relief was the gospel Kinkade offered the world. And the gospel according to Kinkade continues to be a welcome message today.

Andres Serrano's controversial *Piss Christ* is not so popular today. Asked whether it has

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5 Quoted in Siedell, *Who's Afraid of Modern Art: Essays on Modern Art and Theology in Conversation* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2015), location 1757, Kindle.

6 Clapper, “Thomas Kinkade's Romantic Landscape,” p.82.

7 *Ibid.*

8 Quoted in *Ibid.*, p.83.

9 Quoted in *Ibid.*, p.84.

10 *Ibid.*, p.84.

11 *Ibid.*, p.77.

a place in our society, one anonymous school teacher said, “I think the so-called artist has a very sick mind to think of urine as an art form” and “*Piss Christ* demoralizes and insults our beliefs and morals we have, as Christians, learned over time.” Another teacher wrote, “Those who wish to view it, or experience it, may do so and those who are offended may choose to reject it as art at all.” Yet another opined, “*Piss Christ* has a place in society, strictly because we are a free society. However, I would hope that the value system in our society and the dictates of good taste would cause them not to be seen in very many places.”<sup>12</sup> Also, in public debates over *Piss Christ* both liberals and conservatives have assumed that the work is somehow a statement by Serrano on his thoughts about Christianity.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, both the religious right and the art establishment read the title as a statement against religion as if it reads, “piss on Christ.”<sup>14</sup> Certainly Richard Rambuss is right to say, “If Serrano did not mean to provoke, he would not have titled the image as he did.”<sup>15</sup> Yet it is the combination of the crass title (piss is a vulgar word choice) and the medium that offers the most offense. It has been observed that “had the material gone unknown, the artwork may not have caused such a stir.”<sup>16</sup> Then again, as Jorge J. E. Gracia, a Professor of Philosophy and Comparative Literature of the University at Buffalo, says, “Perhaps the message of the work is in perfect accordance with the beliefs he has been accused of undermining.”<sup>17</sup>

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12 Quoted in Terry Barrett, “About Art Interpretation for Art Education,” *Studies in Art Education*, v.42, no.1, (Autumn 2000), p.17, accessed Dec 2015, JSTOR.

13 Siedell, *Who's Afraid of Modern Art*, location 1615.

14 Eleanor Heartney in Alison Knowles, et al., “Art as Spiritual Practice,” *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, v.24, no.3 (Sept 2002), p.21, accessed Dec 2015, JSTOR.

15 Richard Rambuss, “Sacred Subjects and the Aversive Metaphysical Conceit: Crashaw, Serrano, Ofili,” *ELH*, v.71, no.2 (Summer 2004), p.520, accessed Dec 2015, JSTOR.

16 Daniela N. Bazzini, “American Christianity Through the Lens of Art and the Culture Wars” (Master's thesis, Sotheby's Institute of Art, 2013; Ann Arbor: UMI Dissertation Publishing, 2014), p.46, accessed Dec 2015, ProQuest Ebrary.

17 Ilan Stavans and Jorge J. E. Gracia, *Thirteen Ways of Looking at Latino Art* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2014), p.50.

The gospel according to *Piss Christ* is the offensive proclamation of a crucified human being named Jesus Christ. Serrano explains some of what motivated him as follows:

The thing about the crucifix itself is that we treat it almost like a fashion accessory. When you see it, you're not horrified by it at all, but what it represents is the crucifixion of a man, and for Christ to have been crucified and laid on the cross for three days where he not only bled to death, he shat himself and he peed himself to death. So if *Piss Christ* upsets you, maybe it's a good thing to think about what happened on the cross.<sup>18</sup>

Despite his misunderstanding of the timeline of Christ's crucifixion, Serrano's project involved taking an icon that has been cleaned up and lost all of its ability to horrify and then finding a way to reintroduce the shock and awe of Jesus' ugly crucifixion while still producing a beautiful image. Concerning his deliberately disgusting use of urine Serrano says, "piss is not something repugnant, it's something very beautiful, it's a beautiful glowing light...It's waste, and I think it's seen as something repugnant, but I think this aversion to piss probably has more to do with the aversion we have to our own bodies."<sup>19</sup> Daniela Bazzini, in her master's thesis in contemporary art, helpfully describes Serrano's project as follows: "The artist takes human waste and uses it to express the humanity of Christ and the beauty of something ugly, while also attempting to challenge the feelings of disgust concerning the human body."<sup>20</sup> The disgusting humiliation on a cross of a human being called Jesus Christ is the gospel *Piss Christ* offers to the world if they have ears to hear. Yet many professing Christians have not allowed it to speak to them, let alone welcomed its message.

The immediate response of Evangelical Christians to *Piss Christ* and the works of Thomas Kinkade is not surprising. We have not wanted art to challenge us or lead us to change,

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18 Quoted in Bazzini, "American Christianity Through the Lens of Art and the Culture Wars," p.41.

19 Quoted in *Ibid.*, p.42.

20 *Ibid.*, p.42.

let alone to offend us. We want art that is positive and uplifting. We want art that supports our ideas about “family values” with a husband and wife raising well-behaved children who avoid crude language. Thus we praise Kinkade and declare anathemas on Serrano's *Piss Christ*. In a book about the gospel according to U2, Greg Garrett observes the following by way of introduction:

In the visual arts...evangelical Christians acclaim the pretty but unchallenging paintings of Thomas Kinkade, the so-called “Painter of Light,” because as Kinkade claims, “they spread inherent life-giving values,” while the harsh and challenging artistic vision of Andres Serrano's “Piss Christ” (a piece of art that some theologians suggest reflects the shocking humiliation of Christ's death on the cross) has been shunned and called blasphemous.<sup>21</sup>

The real scandal of the beautiful cross is that *Piss Christ* is considered blasphemy while the works of Thomas Kinkade are hailed as gospel truth. Shockingly it is *Piss Christ* that speaks gospel truth and Kinkade's works that give us something less than Christian.

The Roman centurion, who stood facing Jesus Christ as Christ was being crucified on the cross, upon seeing the way that Jesus “breathed His last,” said, “Truly this man was the Son of God” (Mark 15:39). The cross was an instrument of terror designed to put the fear of the gods into any peoples who might dare to revolt against Roman rule. Yet the Roman centurion was justified by faith upon seeing the way that Jesus died. Religion, as a negative term, takes the cross and makes it into pretty jewelry. But it was not a sanitized cross that led the centurion to make such a proclamation. James H. Cone, the African-American liberation theologian, was right to draw the more recent comparison of the cross to the lynching tree.<sup>22</sup> Faith lays ahold of the cross for the ugly lynching tree that it is and paradoxically sees beauty. It is the cross that

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21 Greg Garrett, *We Get to Carry Each Other: The Gospel According to U2* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p.2-3, accessed preview Dec 2015, <https://books.google.com>.

22 James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), accessed preview Dec 2015, <https://books.google.com>.

turns everything upside down for those who believe (cf. 1 Cor 1:17ff). Jesus' death on the cross looks like weakness, not strength. His death on the cross looks like ugliness, not beauty. His death on the cross looks like folly, not wisdom. At least, it looks like weakness, ugliness, and folly to those who are perishing. Therefore, the cross is a scandal or stumbling block or offense for the unbeliever (cf. 1 Cor 1:23, Gal 5:11). Actually, the English word scandal comes from the Greek for stumbling block or offense. However, to those who are being saved the cross is the strength, beauty, and wisdom of God on display. The gospel is Christ and Him crucified.

Yet we are often attracted to theologies that are less than Christian and involve self-justification projects. Daniel Siedell says, “We are drawn, like moths to the light, to what Luther called theologies of glory, those theologies that want to see God working visibly in ways we value (beauty, wealth, strength).” An example that Siedell gives is Joel Osteen.<sup>23</sup> Yet there are other sub-Christian theologies that have masqueraded as Christian. Christian Smith and Melinda Denton in an extensive study of youth and religion found that most youth, especially those who grew up in Catholic and Protestant families, believe in what they called “moralistic therapeutic deism” (MTD). Two of the tenets of MTD are that the chief end of humanity is to feel good and be happy and that God welcomes those who are good into heaven when they die. Another MTD belief is that God does not really need to be involved in our lives except when we need Him to fix a problem.<sup>24</sup> Siedell says that we find these kinds of theologies attractive “because we're human, and we believe we only need some help here and there.”<sup>25</sup> Tragically these religions encourage us to ignore the larger problem of the fall of Adam and pretend that all is well. Such false teachings claim to be the gospel and yet offer something less than Christian.

23 Siedell, *Who's Afraid of Modern Art*, locations 554 and 557.

24 Jim Belcher, *In Search of Deep Faith: A Pilgrimage into the Beauty, Goodness and Heart of Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013), p.27-28, Kindle.

25 Siedell, *Who's Afraid of Modern Art*, locations 556.

The works of Thomas Kinkade subscribe to the sub-Christian theologies of glory. These prints encourage us to ignore the fall of Adam and daydream that all is well. Recall both how Kinkade said, “I like to portray a world without the Fall” and his interpretation of the glowing windows meaning, “all is well.” Moreover, we also heard Kinkade explain how he believes these paintings give people hope as they point to “the beauty of God's creation despite the darkness surrounding our lives.” Compare Kinkade's self-justification project with the Christian metanarrative: the story told in Scripture is that of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation, but Kinkade wants to ignore the fall and simply look back to creation for hope. These paintings are not dreams about the consummation – they ignore the reality of the fall and thus any hope for redemption and consummation. The prints cannot even look back to creation to see its lesson regarding human guilt (cf. Rom 1:20) and thereby encourage conviction. Therefore, they offer neither God's word of law or gospel. These dream-like sets are unable to help people imagine a crucified Savior. Instead, they make-believe that the cross is unnecessary.

The parallels between Kinkade's products and MTD are striking. They are moralistic. The consumer is to imagine a scene of domestic bliss where everyone is good and nice to one another. Indeed, one of the tenets of MTD is that people should be good, nice, and fair to others. The support that these works give to “family values” is decidedly moralistic rather than Christian. The products Kinkade sold are obviously therapeutic. The consumer is to fantasize, Clapper says, “a tranquil domestic setting in a timeless but nonindustrial world free of social and psychological tensions.”<sup>26</sup> Thus it is no surprise to hear the report: “The people who buy Kinkade's reproductions often comment that they like them because they are soothing.”<sup>27</sup>

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26 Clapper, “Thomas Kinkade's Romantic Landscape,” p.94.

27 *Ibid.*, p.95.

Clapper's analysis even concludes,

Kinkade's pictures show paradise already obtained, or nearly so—one has only to step into the picture to enjoy it. This lack of tension diminishes the vitality of Kinkade's images; while it makes them more useful as soothing therapy, the absence of conflict encourages viewers to use them as sedatives, not spurs to soul-searching.<sup>28</sup>

Kinkade's products are also notably deistic since there is no real need for Christ for reasons that should already be apparent. But the similarities do not end with the acronym describing this false religion. One of the reasons that MTD thrives in American Christian circles is how it supports pursuing prosperity since the purpose and goal of life is to feel good and be happy. Kinkade's business is very much at home in the liturgy of consumerism. Siedell says, “His images enable his clientele to escape into an imaginary world where things can be pretty good, as long as we have our faith, our family values, and a visual imagery that reaffirms all this at the office and at home.”<sup>29</sup>

The works of Thomas Kinkade, like any product of MTD and similar sub-Christian theologies, traffic in what Dietrich Bonhoeffer famously called “cheap grace” and expect that God will grant our wishes like a genie. Kinkade paintings do not speak to the viewer so much as the viewer puts words into the paintings' mouths. It is commonly asserted that Kinkade images are not dangerous or challenging. Clapper says, “Kinkade pictures are like bourgeois vacations: an adventure of sorts, but not dangerous, complete with comforts, replicating one's daily existence at home without its cares and shortcomings but with more novelty and whimsy.”<sup>30</sup>

Therefore, the consumer doesn't have to change. Consider another insight Clapper makes about those who choose to dole out the funds to purchase a Kinkade print:

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p.97.

<sup>29</sup> Siedell, *Who's Afraid of Modern Art*, location 1783.

<sup>30</sup> Clapper, “Thomas Kinkade's Romantic Landscape,” p.96.

These are fantasy cottages and country cabins for those who would rather buy a Kinkade reproduction than alter the way they live; owning a picture is easier and cheaper. Thus, buying a Kinkade image of a simpler, more serene lifestyle is a substitute for the hard work of changing one's life.<sup>31</sup>

In truth, we cannot change ourselves any more than we can justify ourselves before God. But Clapper is onto something when he sees that these works offer an easy escape. Siedell says Kinkade's falsely comforting paintings would have us believing, "All we need to do to return to Eden is get our lives in order with some time away."<sup>32</sup> This vacation may be appealing because it appears safe, easy and relatively cheap, but in reality such feelings are incredibly dangerous.

The theology of the works of Thomas Kinkade is so important to understand because it is both so easily seductive and hopeless. These mass produced pretty pictures are not harmless—just the opposite. They purport to be practical to those in the darkness by making believe that the light is on, but really they are unable to offer any real hope or light because they are reality denying and therefore, Siedell says, they are dangerously nihilistic beyond "anything Picasso and Pollock could paint, or Nietzsche and Satre could write." This make-believe world without pain and suffering, Siedell notes, includes no "image that actually connects with the pain and suffering of his clients and offers hope." It, "refuses to take us to the end of ourselves," Siedell says, "refuses the confrontations and disruption that could open us up to grace." It is precisely because they avoid the real world where evil, sin, and death exist that they are without hope. The Garden of Eden they pretend to take us back to Siedell describes as "pretty much the fallen world without the dirtiness of the city and the inconvenience of other people." Thus Kinkade's paintings pretend Eden is a nice resort out in the country when Scripture tells us the path to the tree of life is guarded by cherubim with a flaming sword (Gen 3:24) – a flaming sword that

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Siedell, *Who's Afraid of Modern Art*, location 1779.

foreshadows the cross of Christ. In other words, Kinkade's paintings encourage us, Siedell says, to “follow St. Peter and rebuke Jesus for his claim that he must die (Mark 8:31-33).”<sup>33</sup>

Unlike the works of Thomas Kinkade, *Piss Christ* shouts the very gospel of Jesus' and Him crucified that gives life and hope. Jorge J. E. Gracia turned out to be right when he wondered, “Perhaps the message of the work is in perfect accordance with the beliefs he has been accused of undermining.” Gracia makes the point that it is the doubt about the intentions of the artist that challenges the viewer.<sup>34</sup> Yet regardless of Serrano's purpose in photographing a crucifix in his own urine and giving it the title *Piss Christ*, the work of art shouts life-giving words for those with ears to hear by challenging us in many ways. It forces us to think about what happened on the cross. It takes what is familiar to many in our society and reminds us that it is offensive. It highlights the humanity of Christ when Christians continue to wrestle with a tendency toward Gnosticism—the idea found in some Greek philosophy that the body is evil or (perhaps to use the word often found in this discussion we should say) *profane* and so the goal of life is to seek liberation from the body. *Piss Christ* connects with human beings who experience pain and suffering, takes us to the end of ourselves, and opens us up to grace. It does not encourage us to pretend all is well but to face what cultural anthropologist Ernest Becker called our “denial of death”<sup>35</sup> and point us to our hope in Christ Jesus.

By standing with the ancient church fathers against the heresy of Gnosticism to emphasize the importance of the human body, *Piss Christ* offers real help to those experiencing the darkness surrounding our lives. Sigmund Freud once observed, “we are born between urine

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33 *Ibid.*, locations 1765-1801. That the flaming sword is a type of the cross of Christ is something that I learned in great detail at some point during my M.Div. studies at Westminster Theological Seminary.

34 Ilan Stavans and Jorge J. E. Gracia, *Thirteen Ways of Looking at Latino Art*, p.50.

35 Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press, 1973), Kindle.

and faeces [sic].”<sup>36</sup> During this life Becker says, “The anus and its incomprehensible, repulsive product represents not only physical determinism and boundness, but the fate as well of all that is physical: decay and death.”<sup>37</sup> Surely urine does the same or it would not be so controversial. Moreover, our bodies expel such wastes at the end of this life. Indeed, not only is our aversion to urine and feces more to do with our aversion to our own bodies but our aversion to our bodies has more to do with our attempts to live in denial of death. Thus the works of Thomas Kinkade “help” us to cope and thus to walk around denying reality whereas *Piss Christ* forces us to face reality, to rip off what Becker calls “the character lie,”<sup>38</sup> and encourages us to replace this character lie with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The theology of *Piss Christ* includes that the Jesus Christ insulted and executed on the cross shared in our humanity in every way, except without sin (cf. Heb 4:15, Phil 2:7-8, etc.). He was born between urine and feces, he urinated and defecated in this life, and expelled these wastes at the end. Christ was no exception to these bodily functions. “Baptizing a cheap crucifix in urine reminds us,” Wendy Steiner wrote, “that it was Christ's *body* that died on the cross—a body that bled and contained other fluids.”<sup>39</sup> Indeed, Serrano has said, “You can't have the sacred without the profane.”<sup>40</sup> *Piss Christ* combines the two and says with Christ that all things are clean. I think this is actually what Serrano meant—he did not really mean to agree that piss is profane for he says that it is not repugnant. As one critic said, rather than the crucifix being defiled, the urine was sanctified.<sup>41</sup> Jesus Christ did not live in denial of death but the

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36 Quoted in *Ibid.*, p.33.

37 *Ibid.*, p.31.

38 *Ibid.*, p.91.

39 Quoted in Jerry D. Meyer, “Profane and Sacred: Religious Imagery and Prophetic Expression in Postmodern Art,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, v.65, no.1 (Spring 1997), p.31, accessed Dec 2015, JSTOR.

40 Quoted in Bazzini, “American Christianity Through the Lens of Art and the Culture Wars,” p.42.

41 Meyer, “Profane and Sacred: Religious Imagery and Prophetic Expression in Postmodern Art,” p.31.

sinless one died so that we who were dead in our sins might be sanctified. He was really one of us and therefore able to die for us and in our place. He is even able to sympathize with us in our weaknesses, including as we are tempted to be in denial, and to connect with us in our sufferings and pains.

The scandal of the beautiful cross is that we, especially those who suffer, find beauty in the horror of Christ's suffering and death. Robin M. Jensen, the Professor of the History of Christian Art and Worship at Vanderbilt University, says,

Serrano himself spoke of the work as a juxtaposition of the sacred with the profane, but others took it as a reference to the modern preoccupation – in the time of AIDS – with body fluids as charged with both life and death. The photograph, which shows a plastic crucifix plunged into the artist's blood and urine, speaks deeply to me about Christ's bodily incarnation and the sanctification of human life, especially the life of those who suffer. ...Serrano's crucifix is submerged in what it means to be human, and in that submergence finds a glowing, golden beauty.

She observes, “This art, like life, juxtaposes beauty and horror, vitality and death. This is the essence of its truth.” Turning to examples like gargoyles on the outside of cathedrals with “the image of paradise” on the inside, she says, “Without the ugly, we cannot know the beautiful. Without desolation, we cannot know hope.”<sup>42</sup> Once again Richard Rambuss is right to point out, “The spectacular debasement of a sacred body that works our redemption and is therefore viewed as both horrifying and lovely, shameful and hallowed: this is Christianity's own metaphysical paradox.”<sup>43</sup> Christians should want a resounding affirmative answer to the question, “Does *Piss Christ* have a place in our society?” It is beautiful for suffering human beings with ears to hear. Yet we don't like our art to do this.

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42 Robin M. Jensen, *The Substance of Things Seen: Art, Faith, and the Christian Community* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2004), location 1774-1781, Kindle.

43 Rambuss, “Sacred Subjects and the Aversive Metaphysical Conceit: Crashaw, Serrano, Ofili,” p.515

We can easily deceive ourselves into believing that art in good taste should not challenge us, kill us, and force us to rely on faith alone. Siedell says, “We like our art—and our religion—visually pleasing. We like it practical, useful, maybe a little therapeutic.”<sup>44</sup> I remember hearing that the French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal once said that a king has a jester because he needs entertainment to distract him from thinking about death. Many Americans today use art to avoid contemplating our mortality. Siedell continues, “We want to be active, so we can use art for our own purposes—to elevate, empower, and even *entertain* us” (emphasis added).<sup>45</sup> Our desire to be active is part and parcel, Siedell understands, of our self-justification programs. “Yet a painting is more than meets the eye,” Siedell says, “A painting...requires faith.”<sup>46</sup> Or as he had earlier explained it, “a painting is more than meets the eye, and that we live by faith, not by sight.”<sup>47</sup> Beholding *Piss Christ* as beautiful requires faith like that of the centurion who was justified by faith rather than entertained.

For Kinkade's prints, seeing is in the place of believing. Despite purposefully making work that, as Clapper observes, is “easily comprehensible and inoffensive,” Kinkade thought of himself as the “most controversial artist in the world.”<sup>48</sup> In reality, Kinkade's works are entertainment and even therapeutic but they do not function as art. People develop intimate relationships with Kinkade prints, but emotionally and not as art. Some might argue that his work is incredibly technically proficient. Clapper says, “one can make a strong case that Kinkade's art is simply of poor artistic quality, though this makes little difference to his fans.” He notes several reasons for criticism. For example, “the mark making is timid and

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44 Siedell, *Who's Afraid of Modern Art*, location 546.

45 *Ibid.*, location 547.

46 *Ibid.*, location 559.

47 Daniel Siedell, *Who's Afraid of Modern Art*, location 373.

48 *Ibid.*, p.87, 82.

monotonously repetitive.” Also, “landscape painting is by its nature and tradition highly conventionalized, but it would be difficult to argue that Kinkade deploys the standard conventions with originality.” Nevertheless, any shortcomings in Kinkade's style or brushwork or paint handling are irrelevant to Kinkade's fans. As Clapper says,

“For them the emotional content of the work is all that matters, not its form or its skill in execution. Aside from remarking on his wondrous lighting effects, those who appreciate Kinkade’s images rarely comment on their aesthetic merits. The subject, the mood, and the feelings stirred are what count. Again, admirers and detractors attend to very different concerns.”<sup>49</sup>

Yet our main concerns regarding the works of Thomas Kinkade are not about the quality of his technique but that the kind of relationship they engender is emotional rather than as art and the way they function is as entertainment or therapy or even like advertising instead of as art.

Therefore, I am ready to say that they are not even art, despite my first impressions.

The scandal of the beautiful cross and the dim light of Kinkade's glorified landscapes are an excellent example of how Evangelical Christians may want to think twice before dismissing modern art as not being art and before missing how they might offer genuine healing. To be sure, the beautiful cross is a stumbling block for those who want to make-believe that their lives are Kinkade paintings. It may have been for Kinkade himself. Siedell says, “Making imagery from Eden, [Kinkade] lived east of it. I can only imagine the excruciating pressure he felt to live up to these deceptively dangerous images which deprived him of the grace he so desperately needed by refusing him the freedom to paint what he felt and experienced.”<sup>50</sup> Thankfully, *Piss Christ* is not only art, but for those with ears to hear it can aid in real healing. Yet such grace comes through a baptism of urine and not from some retreat to some special and fancy spa.

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49 Clapper, “Thomas Kinkade's Romantic Landscape,” p.94-95.

50 Daniel Siedell, *Who's Afraid of Modern Art*, location 1806.

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