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## Sacrifice, Piss Christ, and Liberal Excess

### Abstract

Andres Serrano's Piss Christ has been at the centre of one controversy or another for a decade. Much of the debate has focused on questions of tolerance and pluralism. The claim that Piss Christ is offensive to Christians seems to suggest, incorrectly I believe, that Piss Christ has neither place nor precedent within the Christian tradition. To the extent that Piss Christ questions the boundaries between the sacred and the profane, it enacts what it represents. It threatens the identity of conservative Christians who respond by seeking to exclude it from the public realm. I consider that what is at stake is not merely the question of tolerance within a pluralist society but also that of tolerance within a pluralist Church. To whom do religious symbols belong and who has the authority to prescribe the manner in which they are used? It will be my argument in this article that Piss Christ, regardless of authorial intention, is a profoundly religious work that speaks to the very heart of Christianity. Consequently, after ten years, Piss Christ is still worthy of consideration.

## Law & The Sacred: Sacrifice, Piss Christ, and Liberal Excess

Damien Casey

I

Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* has been at the centre of one controversy or another for a decade. Much of the debate has focused on questions of tolerance and pluralism. The claim that *Piss Christ* is offensive to Christians seems to suggest, incorrectly I believe, that *Piss Christ* has neither place nor precedent within the Christian tradition. To the extent that *Piss Christ* questions the boundaries between the sacred and the profane, it enacts what it represents. It threatens the identity of conservative Christians who respond by seeking to exclude it from the public realm. I consider that what is at stake is not merely the question of tolerance within a pluralist society but also that of tolerance within a pluralist Church. To whom do religious symbols belong and who has the authority to prescribe the manner in which they are used? It will be my argument in this article that *Piss Christ*, regardless of authorial intention, is a profoundly religious work that speaks to the very heart of Christianity. Consequently, after ten years, *Piss Christ* is still worthy of consideration.

*Piss Christ* found itself at the centre of controversy once again in October 1997, when Melbourne was host to two exhibitions of the work of Andres Serrano. Serrano's *History of Sex* was showing at the Kirkcaldy Davies Gallery while the National Gallery of Victoria was holding a Serrano retrospective, coinciding with its high profile Rembrandt exhibition. As part of the Serrano retrospective, *Piss Christ* proved to be of more than historical interest when once again it became the subject of a number of attacks. The first attack came from the Catholic archbishop of Melbourne, Dr. George Pell, who, considering the work to be blasphemous, applied unsuccessfully for a Supreme Court injunction to prevent the National Gallery of Victoria from exhibiting it. But where the gavel failed, the hammer of two youths succeeded, by prompting Dr Timothy Potts, the director of the NGV, to cancel the show. Dr Potts claims that he acted out of concern for the safety of his staff, although the general opinion seems to be that he acted hastily, and primarily out of anxiety for the Rembrandts.

*Piss Christ* is not Serrano's most visually striking piece, but it does seem to have generated its own aura out of controversy, and has subsequently become a sort of standard bearer for many of the issues that Serrano's work addresses. It all began in 1989 when *Piss Christ*, along with the homoerotic photographs of Robert Mapplethorpe, found themselves at the centre of controversy in the United States, where the forces of the Christian Right rallied to curtail the National Endowment for the Arts. More recently, Congress legislated, upheld by the Supreme Court, that the NEA must take "into consideration general standards of decency" in awarding grants (Biskupic 1998). The "culture wars" in the U.S. were launched by what could be seen as a ritual counter-desecration, when Senator Alphonse D'Amato tore up a copy of *Piss Christ* in the chambers of the U.S. Senate on May 18, 1989. In so doing, the Senator launched *Piss Christ* into prominence, making it a symbol of the excesses of liberalism.

This issue goes to the heart of the most sacred American separation of Church and State. It remains to be seen, however, to which side of the divide the art establishment belongs. Back in Australia, an infamous piece of Liberal Party electioneering portrayed art as the domain of the elite. At the National Gallery of Victoria the art establishment certainly behaved as if it were a Church, venerating its Rembrandts as if they were their most sacred relics. It is a shame that the juxtaposition of Serrano with Rembrandt was seen as a cause for anxiety rather than an opportunity. Surely, our understanding and appreciation of the work of both artists would have benefited if such a conversation had been allowed to take place. Not only would the many baroque themes and forms of Serrano's work have been brought to our attention, but we could also have discovered new ways of looking at Rembrandt, and the manner in which he also deals with the ambiguity of the abject and its relation to the sacred. I am not suggesting that Serrano be put on the same level as Rembrandt, but rather that misplaced reverence does not service to Rembrandt.

Due to its high profile, *Piss Christ* has come to be seen as emblematic of Serrano's "tableaux" dealing with fluids; blood, urine, milk and sperm. Taken out of this context, however, Serrano's play upon baroque themes with a minimalist palette tends to get lost.<sup>1</sup> But whatever the artist's painterly intentions, they have been overshadowed by the religious aspect of his work. It is my contention that Serrano's exploration of the relation between the abject and the sacred makes *Piss Christ* not only good

art, but good religious art, bordering on the iconic. I am thinking of the theological meaning of icon in which the icon is less a representation than a window onto a deeper reality. *Piss Christ* is also a parable in which our expectations are turned upside down in order that the sacred may manifest, because as Hegel expressed: "the familiar is not understood precisely because it is familiar" (1977: para 30).

The history of its reception appears to show that Serrano's work in general and *Piss Christ* in particular has already unsettled and transgressed many boundaries, and in the process questioned that which is most familiar. Maybe it is not so much an issue of the sacred and the profane so much as the sacred and the mundane. Those who consider *Piss Christ* to be blasphemous would seem to consider that Serrano has profaned a sacred object. In doing so he is considered to have transgressed a distinction that should remain respected and protected. Serrano, they might consider, has in effect pissed on God. Serrano has transgressed upon the sacred with the ultimate profanity. But is it not possible that *Piss Christ* also reveals a genuine and insightful religiosity? In a letter to the NEA, Serrano argues that he did not consider *Piss Christ* impious or blasphemous.

The photograph, and the title itself, are ambiguously provocative but certainly not blasphemous. Over the years, I have addressed religion regularly in my art. My Catholic upbringing informs this work which helps me to redefine and personalize my relationship with God. My use of such bodily fluids as blood and urine in this context is parallel to Catholicism's obsession with "the body and blood of Christ". It is precisely in the exploration and juxtaposition of the symbols from which Christianity draws its strength.

Generally, it is the title that causes the offence. It is the title that frames the work and which brings the juxtaposition of the sacred and the abject to the fore. A related work, *Piss Light*, while containing the same visual elements as *Piss Christ* could indeed be considered to be a *Piss* "lite" to the extent that the title is less confrontational. Indeed, if it is the title that provokes the most offence it could also be seen to evoke the irony of the inscription placed above the cross as recounted by the gospels: "The King of the Jews". But then, the irony of that gesture has also been obscured through familiarity.

The circus that surrounded the Serrano exhibition at the NGV was well encapsulated by a Leunig cartoon that appeared in the paper at the time. It depicted an outraged Archbishop at the foot of the cross crying, "you'll be hearing from our lawyers". Leunig is to my mind quite astute in his observation that the desire to protect and quarantine the sacred can quite easily tend towards the absurd. *Piss Christ* reminds us that the cross was a sign of ignominy. It was not a symbol commonly used by the early Christians, because for them its associations were all too clear. Theologically, the death of Jesus is God's highest self-divestment or *kenosis*. It is here that the definite Christian revelation of God is to be found; in the life and death of Jesus; in his renunciation of mastery and identification with servitude, the poor and the oppressed and all those we treat *like shit*.

Its clear implication is that the concept of divine sovereignty as divine mastery over the world must be abandoned.<sup>2</sup> God's place is with the abject every bit as much as it is on the high altar of the cathedral. Yes, the crucifix as a triumphant symbol is a delicious irony in keeping with the spirit of the gospels. But that irony is lost when we forget its strong association with both ignominy and abjection. Then it merely becomes a sign of domination. In denying negation in God, classical Christian thought obscured one of its most profound insights into suffering. To speak to questions of suffering and injustice Christian thought must uncover its suppressed elements and acknowledge that its symbols, like the divine, cannot be mastered. Serrano's *Piss Christ* goes some way towards doing this.

## II

*Piss Christ* raises profound theological questions concerning Christianity's relation to the logic of sacrifice that has shaped culture. It is a relation marked by ambivalence due to the strength of both sacrificial and anti-sacrificial trajectories within the Christian tradition. *Piss Christ* is indeed blasphemous to the extent that it subverts the sacrificial interpretation of Christ's death. But, in so doing, it is also prophetic to the extent that it calls to mind something perhaps even more essential and original to Christianity. It is this issue that I want to explore in the remainder of this article using *Piss Christ* as an aid for reflection. Like any good art work, *Piss Christ* is evocative rather than didactic and revels in an ambiguity that only individual acts of interpretation can clarify. But already I am implicated in that which Serrano questions. We cannot help but seek to impose order on an otherwise messy world.

In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Emile Durkheim states that

all known religious beliefs. . . always suppose a bipartite division of the whole universe, known and knowable, into two classes which embrace all that exists, but which radically exclude each other. Sacred things are those which the interdictions protect and isolate; profane things those to which these interdictions are applied and which must remain at a distance (1965: 52).

At one level *Piss Christ* seems to transgress the distinction between the sacred and the profane. Closer examination, however, reveals that things are not so simple. The separation of the sacred and the profane has meant that the sacred is itself hedged in by prohibitions. By its very opposition to the profane, the sacred by its nature threatens the social order of everyday profane existence whilst at the same time legitimising its institutions. The function of sacrifice here is to establish order and mark boundaries. Sacrifice constructs and protects the identity of the community whether through expelling its impure elements or by purifying and legitimating lines of descent. In either case, sacrifice constitutes culture by separating it from nature. In accordance with the logic of sacrifice, anything overly ambiguous or permeable that defies the principle of non-contradiction becomes the excluded middle. That which confounds this "A/not A" distinction is considered to be impure to the extent that it "*departs from symbolic order*" or is "*incompatible with the Temple*" (Kristeva 1982: 91). In this way sacrificial logic mimics the whole system of signification conceived as a system of differences.

According to this understanding of signification - that derives from Saussure among others - meaning is not a function of the relation between the sign and that to which it points, but is rather a function of its difference from other signs. Meaning is not so much a matter of indexical relation - even an animal knows that smoke is an index of fire - but of symbolic relations. Consequently, impurity is not a quality of the thing in itself but a function of the thing outside of its proper place. Part of the function of sacrifice is, if not to domesticate the sacred, at least to keep it in its place. A vivid historical testimony to this can be found in the death of Captain Cook who learnt this lesson the hard way. When Cook arrived at the Hawaiian Islands near an important shrine during the four months of Lono, he was mistaken for the god Lono and was worshipped. When he returned outside of the time of Lono he was perceived as a threat, killed and sacrificed.

The tension between the sacred's disruptive power and our desire to domesticate it is paralleled by our horror of the abject to the extent that it also threatens to break down and blur boundaries. The abject, according to the highly influential analysis of Julia Kristeva, are those things that blur the neat distinction between subject and object and consequently threaten the substantiality of identity. Culture is adverse to the abject. It is its antinomy. Serrano explores the abject not only in his *Fluids* series but also in his confrontation with death in *The Morgue* in which the abject is taken to its "limit". Kristeva suggests that

if dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer I who expel, 'I' is expelled. The border has become an object. How can I be without border (1982: 3-4)?

It is intriguing to consider that it is anxiety about borders that lies at the heart of the U.S. "culture wars". The fear of so called "liberal excess" perhaps finds its clearest voice in the cry: "is nothing sacred?" The provocation of border anxiety is, after all, a common denominator in the works of both Serrano and Mapplethorpe. The anxiety that Mapplethorpe provokes finds its expression, not in the abject so much as in the destabilisation of sexual identity that is manifest in homophobia. Iris Marion Young considers homophobia to be the most trenchant of border anxieties precisely because unlike other physical distinctions of race, sex, or disability, the border between gay and straight is so permeable (1990: 146). The homosexual to the extent that he defies the A/not A distinction is an "abomination". The interesting thing about homophobia however is that it tends to manifest itself most clearly amongst those who protest too much.

Similarly, there seems to be an aura of the disingenuous about any accusation of blasphemy. The line between the domestication and the protection of the sacred is so thin as to be permeable. But then when a church identifies itself too closely with the sacrificial logic of exclusion, a gesture like Serrano's will inevitably call that identity into question. The abject, however, by definition cannot be domesticated. It is for this reason that Georges Bataille in his effort to retrieve a sense of the sacred that was unable to

be domesticated sought to re-establish the ancient association of the sacred with the abject as that which exceeds the grasp of reason under the name "heterology". Heterology is the science of the sacred that has not ossified into doctrines and dogma. Bataille believed that once objectified, the sacred became a thing and ceased to be sacred. Heterology, Bataille considered, is mindful of the fact that our notions of "God" all too often become obstacles to the sacred. Heterology is

the science of what is completely other. The term *agiology* [the study of the holy] would perhaps be more precise, but one would have to catch the double meaning of *agio* (analogous to the double meaning of *sacer*), *soiled* as well as *holy*. But it is above all the term *scatology* (the science of excrement) that retains in the present circumstances (the specialization of the sacred) an incontestable expressive value as the doublet of an abstract term such as *heterology* (Bataille, 1985: 102n).

The historian Caroline Walker Bynum has demonstrated the manner in which, for the medieval imagination, the status of the things that the body left behind became a question of vital importance for eschatology to the extent that questions of eschatology and scatology sometimes became intertwined. What is it, the medievals asked, that is resurrected with the resurrection of the body? What was the status of food, finger nail clippings, dead skin and hair? What worried the medieval imagination was the relation between identity and change and the boundary between what is other to the self and what is intrinsic to the identity, understood in terms of the integrity of the body (see Bynum 1995). The medievals however were suspicious of all processes of becoming. It was rather stasis and self-containment that seemed to signify perfection. It was for this reason that the crucifixion of Christ held so much fascination, precisely because it so contradicted the metaphysical idea of perfection while making his humanity so vivid.

Crucifixion was generally considered to be the most abject of deaths and for this reason the criminal was executed outside the limits of the city. He was literally expelled from society. In the case of Christ's crucifixion this state of abjection was experienced bodily through piercing and scourging, "like water draining away" (Psalm 22: 14), the boundary between inside and outside collapsed. The permeability of Christ's body was such that many medieval mystics came to identify the body of Christ as feminine. "Not only was Christ enfleshed with flesh from a woman, his own flesh did womanly things: it bled, it bled food and it gave birth" (Bynum 1992: 101). In the words of Marguerite of Oingt, his "veins burst when in one day [he] gave birth to the whole world" (Bynum 1992: 97). Birth is of course a very messy process.<sup>3</sup>

In the light of so much abjection, piss is surely a very mild thing. Or is the issue one of presumption on Serrano's part that he should so identify with Christ as to immerse a crucifix in his own urine? To the extent that Serrano in his *Fluids* series uses not only urine but blood, sperm and milk, it is clearly not the piss itself that is significant so much as bodily fluids in general. Bodily fluids defy the myth of self-containment which is why the crucifixion has always been such a stumbling block for Platonic metaphysics; which is why the death of God needs to be proclaimed over and over again.

### III

A more specifically Christian understanding, on the other hand, would focus not so much upon the abjection of sacrifice but upon a God who identifies with those who are "abjected". Despite common perceptions, the sacrificial interpretation of the death of Jesus can be found in only one book of the New Testament, and that book, the *Letter to the Hebrews*, is about the end of sacrifice. The overall logic of the New Testament could be seen to overturn the sacrificial distinction between the sacred and the profane rather than reinforce it. For Nietzsche it is the "death of God" that abolishes the logic of sacrifice and the metaphysical distinction between the "true" and apparent world that has served to denigrate the everyday world of experience (1982a: 485-6).<sup>4</sup> Nietzsche hopes that with this abolition the everyday may itself be infused with the aura that had previously been reserved for the sacred. In this at least, Nietzsche is highly incarnational.

The end of sacrifice is most clearly expressed within the Eucharist which is the paramount sacrament of Christian identity. As Kristeva expresses succinctly: "to eat and drink the flesh and blood of Christ means. . . to transgress symbolically the Levitical prohibitions, to be symbolically satiated" (Kristeva 1982: 119). Sin comes to reside no longer in the impurity of the object but in the subjective will. But

even though the New Testament ostensibly presents us with the end of sacrifice, sacrifice has remained an intrinsic part of Christian understanding. The sacramental theologian Louis-Marie Chauvet concedes that whilst, throughout the history of Christianity, the anti-sacrificial has been retained and lived by an elite, the most common representation and practice has tended towards the sacrificial (Chauvet 1995: 310). It would appear, therefore, that there is a strong tendency -- psychological or cultural -- towards the logic of sacrifice that cannot be effectively denied, but which can perhaps be redeemed.

A simple denial of sacrifice does not escape the sacrificial logic. The attempt to simply negate the A/not A binary remains trapped by the very logic that it is trying to avoid. Simple liberalisation has its own inherent dangers. Chauvet warns that to conceive a God who is "all love" in reaction to the vengeful God can be just as perverse.

When 'love', under the pretext of forgiveness, can no longer forbid anything, when it is itself no longer structured by a law and thus by prohibitions, this excess of love, to which one can never respond adequately... risks being experienced imaginatively as an unpayable debt (Chauvet 1995: 315).

It becomes in effect a persecution. It is perhaps the return of the sacred excess as exemplified by Bataille's *potlatch* in which the spiralling game of one-upmanship under the pretext of generosity aims at the destruction of the other. *Piss Christ* does not deny the logic of sacrifice. Rather, it subverts it by bringing it into contact with its repressed/contaminating elements.

There is one more approach by which to make sense of the issues surrounding *Piss Christ* and its relation to both the sacred and sacrifice. The structuralist paradigm describes a bipartite division that structures all systems of signification according to two distinct yet inseparable logics. These two logics could perhaps be understood in terms of A:B rather than A/not A to the extent that neither is reducible to the other. Roman Jakobson described these axes of signification in terms of the tropes of metaphor and metonymy which he considered to be condensed expression of the axes themselves. The metaphoric is the axis of selection, denotation and identity whereas the metonymic is the axis of combination, connotation and difference. All systems of signification revolve around these two axes. Speech, for example, "implies a *selection* of certain linguistic entities and their *combination* into linguistic units of a higher degree of complexity" (Jakobson 1971: 51). Within these parameters, sacrifice aligns itself with the metaphoric to the extent that it operates according to principles of substitution, gathering meaning around a unificatory centre. Sacrifice, Julia Kristeva suggests, mimics the institution of the symbolic order. "It solemnizes the vertical dimension of the sign: the one that leads from the thing that is left behind, or killed, to the meaning of the word and transcendence" (1982: 72-3). Metaphor becomes privileged through its association with the paternal myth and the "name/law of the father" as the keystone of signification. Similarly, Nancy Jay has shown how sacrifice accomplishes what fatherhood, seen as a non-natural conventional relation, cannot bring about, namely: a mediation between the symbolic and the 'natural' indexical bond that is considered the prerogative of motherhood (Jay 1992). Consequently, metonymy has come to be associated with the feminine and the messy process of becoming that sacrifice attempts to transcend but which the Christian tradition from time to time has nonetheless remembered.

For Western metaphysics, the substantiality of the metaphoric remains the ideal, the one, the goal to which the less substantial metonymic processes of becoming are sacrificed. Christianity through its complicity with metaphysics has, as Bataille observed, "made the sacred substantial" (1985: 242). Through its alliance with metaphysics, Christianity has forgotten that the cross was meant to be a "stumbling block". As long as it is interpreted according to the logic of sacrifice, the cross will remain the great symbol of the *transcendence of the bodily processes of becoming*. In effect, it becomes just another sacrifice even if it is the sacrifice *par excellence*. In sacrifice, Jay explains, "death disorganises the victim (a product of sexual reproduction) only to permit re-organisation on another level, that of eternal social structures" (Jay 1992: 149). The sacrificial interpretation of Christ's death consequently threatens to obscure the meaning of the incarnation by sacrificing the particular to the universal. Serrano's attempt to return the crucifix to the bodily processes of becoming could be seen as an attempt to retrieve the meaning of the incarnation. Just as the death of Jesus can only be understood in the light of the resurrection, neither should it be separated from the ethical orientation of his whole life as a man for others. The gospels show that in practice -- breaking the Sabbath and dining with sinners - - this often involved the transgression of the sacred law's interdictions. But if instead the Christian revelation in Jesus is totalised in terms of his sacrificial death, then the meaning of the incarnation is

trivialised. Far from challenging *the status quo*, the incarnation becomes absorbed into it, in obedience to the law of the Father. Consequently, the cross itself, far from being a stumbling block, becomes a new principle of totalisation, the ruling principle of Western metaphysics.

The funny thing about such metaphysical principles or *archai*, however, is that to the extent that they govern a structure, they escape its structurality (Hart 1989: 83). Consequently, they are also the blind-spot of the system to the extent that they must simply be assumed. Believed to guarantee the identity of the system, the ruling metaphysical principle is not self-grounding but has its own foundation elsewhere. So whilst the metaphysical concerns itself with identity, this identity is itself "undecidable" from within the system. From the point of view of the system then, the ruling principle is structurally unsound. As a result, it serves to cover over the flaws and cracks of the system. *It is the metaphysical rug under which the dirt is swept*. Given time, it will eventually come to take on the characteristics of the dirt and the cracks that it was meant to hide. The corner stone of the entire symbolic order becomes itself the object, the blind spot in the system that the artist here displays for our edification. Serrano returns this *arche* to its repressed and forgotten element, the metonymic as expressed by the biological processes that have been abjected by the symbolic order. Perhaps in contemplating *Piss Christ* we can restore to the cross some of its subversive power.

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## Footnotes

1 "Serrano noted that his intent was to use the fluids in the same way a painter would, yet instead of using paint to represent the thing - say red for blood, yellow for flesh - he would use the real substances; substance not just representation" (Karsnicki 1996).

2 Has not the crucifix itself functioned as a symbol of sovereignty? In which case the "culture wars" are also being fought over who has sovereignty over this particular symbol.

3 It will perhaps be worthwhile to recall that in the book of Leviticus childbirth required a longer period of isolation before purification than any other state of temporary pollution.

4 *Piss Christ* could be seen to illustrate Nietzsche's view that "all things that live long are gradually saturated with reason [so] that their origin in unreason becomes improbable" (Nietzsche 1982b: 9).