

1989

## Obscenity: Andres Serrano Controversy (1989): Correspondence 17

Jacob Neusner

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Senator Pell

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*Address Sept. 1, 1989-June 30, 1990*

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4 27 89

Reverend Mr. Donald E. Wildmon  
c/o American Family Association  
Tupelo, Mississippi 38803

Dear Mr. Wildmon,

I read your article in the Washington Times for April 26, which was sent to me by the Acting Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts; I am a Member of the National Council on the Arts, which is the advisory board of NEA. President Reagan appointed me to the Council for a six year term, 1984-1990. I enclose the mailing as it reached me this morning. I think you should see it.

I see two distinct issues. First is the object itself, which is protected, so we are supposed to think, as "art." The word "art" is used to justify a blatantly blasphemous and offensive fabrication. You and I are not going to fathom what is artistic about this "art," other than that someone says it is "art."

Second is the use of public funds in this connection. Whether it is art, great art, bad art, or not art, it assuredly is not art that on the face of it should receive public funds of any kind. As you are now doubtless aware, no one in NEA had any role in selecting this item; public funds were given to private agencies, and the agencies that we supported are reputable. Or, at least, were.

I will raise the question when this sort of program arises again of how we can make certain public funds in no way, directly or otherwise, can again be used to support what is out and out bigotry against any religion, in this case Christianity; or against any ethnic group and so on. My sense is that we can identify agencies and institutions that do other things altogether in support of the arts; we can avoid sponsoring agencies that run this kind of program at all. At any rate that seems to me a constructive solution to what to me is the horror at hand. There are numerous important institutions and programs in support of the Arts that in no way could ever produce this sort of result, and that is where our funds should go.

I hope this letter helps to assure you that you are by no means alone, and that people who bear (some) responsibility would like to solve the problem in public policy to which you rightly have called attention. The issue is not "free speech" or "art for art's sake." It is (merely) the use of public funds. I am sending a copy of this letter to Mr. William F. Buckley, Jr., National Review, whose thinking on matters of this kind I find extremely sensible.

Sincerely,