Rescuing God from Bad Taste: Religious Kitsch in Theory and Practice

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> One need not look far for such liturgical kitschifications: in many worship services the angels no longer cry out 'Holy, Holy, Holy – but rather Nice, Nice, Nice!'… A kitschified cross no longer drips blood but honey, no longer embodies pain but plastic, no longer mediates salvation but sentiment.[1]

Introduction

To describe an object or image as 'kitsch' is to take aim with the weapon of aesthetic and ethical judgment, the most popular ammunition being the accusation of 'bad taste'. This assault is often launched at humble imaginings that attempt to depict sacred subjects through objects or images that constitute the meaning of religion in the everyday. The failure of these objects in the eyes of kitsch critics is due to their being 'bad art' or 'bad religion', or worse still, having both these properties fused into the single object. From the anti-kitsch point of view, the one thing more abominable than a portrait of children on the grass is a portrait of children on the grass clustered at the feet of Jesus.[2] Of course, this image is not necessarily kitsch in itself, nor is it inherently worthy of derision, especially since the two are

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[1] Johan Cilliers, 'The Unveiling of Life: Liturgy and the Lure of Kitsch', *HTS Theological Studies*, vol. 66, no. 2 (2010), p. 3.

[2] The sight of children on the grass is particularly repugnant to Milan Kundera, and I am here alluding to his often quoted definition of kitsch that holds sweet children, or rather images of them, to be exemplary of the kitsch aesthetic. He writes, "Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: how nice to see children running on the grass! The second tear says: how nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass! It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch." See Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (New York: Harper and Row, 1984), p. 251.

not always synonymous. Indeed, for many individuals this image would be moving and inspiring. This is the problem with kitsch: it is a culturally loaded term that problematises, through its historical connotations of cheap and inauthentic tastelessness, any relationship with a 'kitsch' object that is in fact genuine, meaningful and positive. The result is that lovers of kitsch, those who Hermann Broch calls 'kitsch-men', are brought ethically into aesthetic arguments so that it is not just the objects' deficiency but those who appreciate (or simply fail to notice) the object's deficiency that become the point of scorn.[3]

This article seeks to discover whether the term 'kitsch' is salvageable from beneath this heavy burden of classically negative and elitist judgments that dismiss it as unsophisticated and facile or even immoral and evil.[4] In order to answer such a quest it must be discerned whether or not there are any characteristics of kitsch that exist independently of subjective and personal taste, in other words elements not automatically read in terms of what Roger Scruton calls the "yuk feeling."[5] It will be argued that there are indeed characteristics that identify a religious object as kitsch, including ambiguous distinction between sacred and profane, commodification, imitation, the deliberate and easy manipulation of emotions and the agency of the believer in the construction of meaning for the object. This necessarily involves some discussion of the aesthetics and ethics of religious imagery in general, but this aestheticism leads us nowhere if it is not supported by an application to concrete practices. The point here is to look at these aspects without self-satisfactorily dismissing them as 'bad'. This is a very difficult task, and to prevent such an occurrence religious kitsch must be considered in terms of those who embrace it as part of their religious practice in addition to the perspective of its critics. Thus in the second section of the article the definition will then be tested against concrete examples. For purposes of testing universal, or at least, cross-cultural, claims these examples will compare kitsch from Christian and Muslim traditions, the former the

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[3] Hermann Broch, 'Notes on the Problems of Kitsch', in *Kitsch: A World of Bad Taste*, Gillo Dorfles (ed.), (New York: Universe Books, 1969), p. 49.

[4] Broch deemed the maker of kitsch to be a "malefactor who profoundly desires evil". See Hermann Broch, 'Evil in the Value System of Art', in Dorfles, *Kitsch*, p. 76.

[5] Roger Scruton, 'Kitsch and the Modern Predicament', *City Journal*, vol. 9, no. 1 (1999), at http://www.city-journal.org/html/9_1_urbanities_kitsch_and_the.html. Accessed 15/2/2015.

subject of substantial Western aesthetic scholarship and the latter lacking in similar attention. While this means the application of schemas developed for Christian experience to non-Christian experience is thus somewhat unavoidable, it is hoped that ultimately there are generalities that prove "kitsch" to be useful as a label that helps identify a discrete category of religious material objects across religious traditions.

Kitsch and Religious Kitsch

Kitsch as both term and concept comes out of the nineteenth-century boom in consumerism which led to a proliferation of cheap goods produced with the intent of being passed off as more accessible versions of higher priced (and quality) goods.[6] This would explain why kitsch has typically been associated with cheapness and mass-production. Yet kitsch objects do not have to be cheap in terms of monetary value, and while there is indeed a tendency for kitsch to be produced and sold at a minimum quality and cost, this is not a sufficient factor in making something kitsch; there are examples of kitsch that are expensive and well crafted, and objects that draw attention to their costliness can become kitsch by virtue of their self-consciousness. Thus kitsch is more than a matter of economics. This is because, as many scholars of material culture have been aware, physical objects reflect non-physical ideas, even causing or determining belief systems and social behaviour.[7] So the mass production of inferior quality or cheaper goods produced kitsch when the motive behind it was to enable the working and middle classes to imitate the wealth and status of the upper classes. Thorstein Veblen argued that when the lower classes try to imitate the manners and taste of the upper classes, they could never do so properly and so their attempts became superficial and artificial.[8] What Veblen means by 'properly' is left to the reader's own judgment. Presumably, writing in

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[6] According to Tomas Kulka there are those who argue for earlier dates for the emergence of the concept of kitsch even though the term was not used prior to the late nineteenth century. However, he argues that from the nineteenth century onwards the spread of kitsch was increasing and I agree with his assertion that "whether kitsch began at some point in recent history, or whether it is as old as art itself, one thing is beyond dispute: Kitsch has become an integral part of our modern culture, and it is flourishing now more than ever before". See Tomas Kulka, *Kitsch and Art* (University Park, Pennsylvania: State Press, 1996), p.16.

[7] Colleen McDannell, 'Interpreting Things: Material Culture Studies and American Religion', *Religion*, vol. 21, no. 4 (1991), p. 373.

[8] Quoted in Jukka Gronow, *The Sociology of Taste* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 35.

1899, Veblen's class consciousness was finely attuned to what has in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries come to be regarded as 'elitism', where the supposed upper classes are naturally bestowed with superior or 'proper' taste.

This elitism became particularly pronounced in the art world, and as attacks on the grounds of kitsch were rife amid industrial design circles of the nineteenth century, in the twentieth, it was the art world that came to equate kitsch with 'bad art' and 'bad taste'. Influential critics such as Clement Greenberg set the agenda for artists and critics to fear and loathe 'bad art'.[9] What is meant by 'bad' is again open to interpretation, and for the most part in terms of kitsch it is taken to mean sentimental, inauthentic, fake ("spurious" for Greenberg), shallow, undemanding yet superficially provocative, mediocre and immoral.[10] These and many more adjectives have been used to describe art of the kitsch variety, most of them in a similarly pejorative vein. Yet the popularity of kitsch is, for its critics, a most frustrating feature, and leads to ethical judgments not only of objects but of individuals, for the popularity of kitsch is not reconcilable with its status as 'bad art' unless the masses are similarly assumed to exhibit 'bad taste'.[11]

This is where the terms of kitsch become particularly murky, for it is in these kinds of judgments that the categories of aesthetics and ethics become confused.[12] This is a problem especially for religion, since religion already has a history of problematic relations between aesthetics and ethics.[13] This naturally translates into an ambiguous relationship with the arts, as well as, and even more significantly for our purposes here, the objects and images that make up what has been called 'lived religion'.[14] The dilemma of religious kitsch is that on the one hand it is considered an inappropriate vehicle for representations of the sacred, in varying degrees the image of the divine is believed to be beyond and above representation in the kitsch style. On the other hand, religious kitsch is in many instances

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[9] Roger Scruton, *Modern Culture* (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 92.
[10] Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture*: *Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), p.10.
[11] Ruth Holliday and Tracey Potts, *Kitsch! Cultural Politics and Taste* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), p. 240.
[12] Broch, 'Notes on the Problem of Kitsch', p. 71.
[13] Frank Burch Brown, *Religious Aesthetics* (London: Macmillan, 1990), p. 3.
[14] David D. Hall, 'Introduction', in *Lived Religion in America: Towards a History of Practice*, ed. David D. Hall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), pp. vii-xiii.

regarded as a legitimate and meaningful channel for communion with the divine.

From the negative stance kitsch is 'bad religion'. Karl Pawek has included in his definition of kitsch not only "stylistic deficiency" but also "theological deficiency".[15] Kitsch is thus offensive on two levels, and despite Pawek's attempt to separate the categories of aesthetics (stylistic deficiency) and ethics (theological deficiency), it is extremely difficult to extract the 'bad religion' argument from that of 'bad taste' or 'bad art'. This is because, if we are working solely with reference to the religious traditions that accede that the sacred can in fact be represented visually, the logic that suggests a statue of the sacred heart is theologically deficient is dependent on the assumption that it is deficient because it is inadequately or inauthentically representing Christ, rather than an objection to the representation in itself. This is solely because the *form* is inferior and unworthy and thus the whole object is in 'bad taste'. This line of reasoning presumes no objection to 'high art' images of Christ, for instance in Renaissance masterpieces, because they are the opposite of stylistic, and thus in Pawek's sense, theological, deficiency.

Pawek fails to describe what it is about religious kitsch that makes it not worthy to stand up to the responsibility of depicting holy subjects. S. Brent Plate states that, "because of the power of the sacred, there are rules that must be followed in the correct manner in order for the profane to come in contact with it. There is a dividing line between the two, but there are always ritualistic passages that allow those lines to be crossed".[16] He cites washing hands and lighting candles as examples of such ritualistic passages. We can extend his argument further to encompass the visual boundaries that separate the sacred and profane to suggest that religious kitsch is inadequate for the visual representation of the sacred because it has failed to undergo certain ritualistic processes in the correct manner (or at all). These would include matters not only of production but also context and intention. Non-kitsch religious imagery traditionally is housed in 'serious' religious contexts, such as a church or a mosque, thus the space in which the picture of Christ hangs or the calligraphic name of Allah is exhibited has been consecrated and set aside as holy. The images

[15] Karl Pawek, 'Christian Kitsch', in Dorfles, *Kitsch*, p. 145.
[16] S. Brent Plate, *Blasphemy: Art That Offends* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2006), p. 40.

themselves may also be blessed, as in the objects used in the Catholic liturgy. These objects, by virtue of their production, location and sanctification become unique and exclusive. In contrast, religious kitsch is available widely and profusely, from religious bookshops to secular discount stores, and one can come across it without necessarily crossing the boundary between sacred and profane. From the anti-kitsch perspective religious kitsch has not gone through the process of separation from other profane items, and so has not been made worthy to receive the image and by extension the presence of the sacred. Thus a Quranic wall clock is more home decor than sacred image.

These rules are not, however, in practice made exclusively by religious institutions. While in theory it is the religious tradition that dictates such processes, for example ritual laws drawn from scriptural authority, in reality, the use of religious kitsch demonstrates that those believers who use these objects religiously are able to ritually process them on their own terms in order to make them worthy. It is their actions with an object that determine its religious worth, as David Morgan states "the practices of belief are even more common measures than what people say they believe".[17] When believers make the conscious decision to purchase an item of religious kitsch for the purpose of spiritual devotion, this act forms the process by which contact is permitted between the sacred and the profane. The way in which the object is used determines its spirituality for most lovers of religious kitsch, and its popularity reflects a concern with spiritual purpose rather than official sanction, especially as that official reading of kitsch depends on a hierarchy of taste that betrays an elitism that proves difficult to justify when faced with the reality of the dissolution of distinctions between high and low culture, sacred and profane.[18] For example the *Last Supper* necktie (Figure 1) brings high culture (Renaissance art) into low culture (fashion) and the sacred (Christ's last moments) together with the profane (a necktie).

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[17] David Morgan, 'Art, Material Culture and Lived Religion', in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and the Arts*, ed. Frank Burch Brown (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 486.

[18] Sam Binkley, 'Kitsch as a Repetitive System: A Problem for the Theory of Taste Hierarchy', *Journal of Material Culture*, vol. 5, no. 2 (2000), p. 132.

Figure 1: *Last Supper Necktie*, Krisar Enterprises. Image retrieved 15/2/2015 from http://www.marketworks.com/storefrontprofiles/DeluxeSFItemDetail.aspx?sfid=48198&c=799569&i=217928676.

The creation of such an object reveals religious kitsch as motivated by more than what Veblen called "conspicuous consumption".[19] The *Last Supper* necktie may be a 'conversation piece' but it paradoxically reveals and conceals a broader process of commodification of religion in which religious symbols, experiences, rituals, even beliefs may be in one way or another commercially exchanged or marketed.[20] This manifests especially in religious kitsch, which is the most obvious form of religion that can be bought and sold, its value specifically influenced by its religious associations (often exclusively and superficially of a visual kind) yet simultaneously subject to the same seductive and ubiquitous forces of consumerism that impact on all commodities. Kitsch cannot be as motivated by show as Veblen's theory suggests because part of the power

[19] See Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (Toronto: Dover Publications, 2012[1899]), pp. 43-62.

[20] 'Online Store', Krisar Enterprises, at http://www.marketworks.com/storefrontprofiles/DeluxeSFItemDetail.aspx?sfid=48198&c=799569&i=217928676. Accessed15/2/2015. This page is a useful example of the blurring of categories as it explains that the tie can be worn to parties or to work as a conversation piece, as well as its physical properties (100% 'silk-feel' polyester), followed by a detailed description of the image including a more narrative than theological explanation of the actions of all twelve apostles; for example "Peter is holding a knife, which is pointed away from Christ, also a foreshadowing of Peter's violent protection of Christ in Gethsemane"; and lastly we are told to check out the sellers other items and given our PayPal options for Christ's last moments. The issue of commodification of religion is far beyond the focus of this article, so I direct the reader to works such as R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); David Lyon, *Jesus In Disneyland* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000); and Luiz Alexandre Solano Rossi, *Jesus Goes to McDonald's: Theology and Consumer Society* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011).

of kitsch lies in its implication of the user in a mutual deception where religious kitsch makes use of the shorthand created by commodity fetishism in mistakenly attributing the value of the object to its appearance.[21] In this way objects can be designated as religious kitsch if they appear as such, that is, hiding the processes of their manufacture so that a figurine of Vishnu purchased in a discount store is religious kitsch, perhaps even a sacred object if a believer can recognise the presence of the deity in it[22]. This is despite the likelihood of its creation in a factory, its packaging in foam or plastic and its discounted purchase price; as well as its deficient visual qualities such as messy paint job, garish colour scheme or misshapen sculptural form. Kitsch's hallucinatory power aids in transcendence of such inadequacies. In addition, religion's power to transcend the banalities of the everyday imbues the objects with the extra authority of the sacred, making the object doubly powerful because the twin gods of consumerism and divinity have decreed them to be so.[23]

Importantly, such a spiritual and fetishistic aura re-mythifies the object that has been de-mythified by the processes of mass reproduction.[24] This is an attempt to regain, or rather imitate, the originality and uniqueness of the initial image. The uniqueness of the image has been lost in its conversion to an easily replicated formula, where the worth of the object is simplified into its ability to recreate for the kitsch viewer the emotions evoked by the original. Returning to the *Last Supper* necktie, it can be seen that the object has no great value independent of its imitation of the great painting.[25] Without such a reference, regardless of how cheaply or inaccurately imitated, the object becomes just another polyester tie; and so by destroying the uniqueness of Da Vinci's image paradoxically the tie creates an illusion of uniqueness. Interestingly, the most immediate objection to such parasitic behaviour refers to the violation of a great

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[21] Vincent J. Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York Continuum, 2005), p. 37.
[22] Allison Chan, 'Religious Kitsch: Faith in Drag', *Encounter* [radio program], ABC Radio National (28/02/2014) at http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/encounter/5282962. Accessed 1/03/2015.
[23] Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 18.
[24] Gillo Dorfles, 'Kitsch', in Dorfles, *Kitsch*, p. 26.
[25] Ulrich Timme Kragh, 'Of Pop, Kitsch, and Cultural Heritage', *The Newsletter*, no. 62 (2012), p. 9.

masterpiece. Here is the secret to religious kitsch's innocence, something that is used in the image's defense by lovers of religious kitsch: the tie is not trying to imitate God, and bypasses blasphemy in its self-consciousness since it is actually imitating other attempts to represent the divine and this second degree results in a replica of emotion rather than holiness. In this way Matei Calinescu is correct in the assertion that the falsehood of kitsch should not be confused with forgery. He writes "the deceptive character of kitsch does not lie in whatever it may have in common with actual forgery but in its claim to supply consumers with essentially the same kinds and qualities of beauty as those embodied in unique or rare and inaccessible originals".[26]

It does this visually as well as emotionally, and kitsch has as its basic aesthetic strategy the repetition of images that are familiar and easily recognisable. It operates as abbreviation for a long tradition of visual representation, by utilising the shorthand that comes in the form of a recognisable visual language, the work having already been done by centuries or millennia of continual use of the same images. This is in part why kitsch is sometimes considered easy or lazy. However, the visual traditions also are perpetuated by this process, which reinforces conservative imaginings of religion, for example the pervasiveness of the depiction of Christ as Caucasian, blue eyed, with flowing locks, facial hair and robes and above all gentle and tender. A notable is example is Warner Sallman's 1941 painting *Head of Christ* which David Morgan has shown to be both tapping into historical depictions of this Jesus and influential on the popular religious imagination in turn.[27]

It is the preference for emotional rather than intellectual relationships with these objects that many have found so odious. Robert C. Solomon argues that it is our poor opinion of the emotions, especially the softer, 'sweeter' emotions that are at the heart of the distaste directed at kitsch.[28] Kitsch is also charged with not only invoking excessive or unwarranted emotions, but doing so deliberately and self-consciously, and

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[26] Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*, 2nd ed. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1987), p. 252.
[27] David Morgan, 'Imagining Protestant Piety: The Icons of Warner Sallman', *Religion and American Culture*, vol. 3, no. 1 (1993), pp. 29-47.
[28] Robert C. Solomon, 'On Kitsch and Sentimentality', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 49, no. 1 (1991), p. 1.

even to the point of self-indulgence. Like consumer desire, which Vincent J. Miller states "is not really about attachment to things, but about the joys of desiring itself" the joy of kitsch is similarly in the emotion elicited rather than any genuine attachment to the actual object.[29] Miller warns that because this seeking after unquenchable emotion and desire is akin to seeking an infinite God they may be confused and conflated into generic, unspecific desire.[30] Religious kitsch sits at the crossroads of these categories quite comfortably and smugly, meeting the desire for God, the desire for emotion and the desire for desire indiscriminately and in one convenient step.

Critics of religious kitsch fail to recognise that these objects may inspire religious experience, and if they do the experience is assumed to be somehow false or inferior. Kitsch is accused of seeking emotion where there is no object that would warrant that emotion. So for example, religious kitsch elicits religious devotion without an encounter with God.[31] This presumes a very narrow view of the functions of kitsch, one in which the sacred is understood as somehow being present in the object or the object allows for the believer to transcend their ordinary selves to encounter God. This is certainly the case for many items of religious material culture, for example in Hindu statues in which the deity is considered present or in ceremonies of Mende women in Sierra Leone in which the wearer of a spiritual mask embodies the spirit.[32] However, these kinds of religious material culture are found in explicitly religious contexts, such as in a temple, on a pilgrimage, or in a sacred ceremony. The aims of religious kitsch are of a less dramatic, more domestic, even humble nature. As David Morgan writes about popular Christian imagery, their popularity "is based on the way they answer to the needs of the devout, replying in a voice that is not grandiose, imposing, authoritative, or impersonal, but tailored to the stature of the believer's life".[33] For example the artifacts that make up Catholic domestic shrines do not only cement relationships with the divine

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[29] Miller, *Consuming Religion*, p. 7.
[30] Miller, *Consuming Religion*, p. 7.
[31] Karsten Harries, *Meaning of Modern Art* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. 80.
[32] David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), pp. 48, 65.
[33] David Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p. 23.

but also those within the family through meaningful object selection.[34] Similarly, functions may be as simple as a reminder of faith commitment, as in a Muslim *shahada* pendant ; or as an indirect or non-confrontational method for 'witnessing', as in Christian T-shirts or "witness wear".[35] Some religious kitsch, especially images of Christ, Mary or other Christian saints that emphasise their traits of tenderness, sympathy and accessibility, are kept to 'watch over' believers because "divine sovereignty is less important than divine mercy".[36]

Even this domesticated version of religious experience is often of questionable authenticity to critics of kitsch. Frank Burch Brown suggests that any art that aspires to sublimity is doomed because having "overtly grand and lofty goals, the art of the sublime, when anything less than truly great, tends to cheapen its subject to some degree, which often results in at least traces of kitsch".[37] As discussed above, the issue of 'bad taste' is revealed to be in practice a concern over the ability to accurately, or at least adequately, represent the glory of the sacred. Roger Scruton takes it a step further and argues that religious kitsch, in attempting to elicit devotion and emotion, takes us on a shortcut that removes all authenticity from the experience because "religious peace is a rare gift, which comes about only through spiritual discipline… [kitsch] takes us there too easily, so that we know we have not arrived".[38] In other words the devotion educed from religious kitsch is obtained without the effort that genuine spirituality requires, so it cannot be real. Scruton also participates in the above-mentioned implication of the kitsch devotee in the critique of the kitsch object. He claims that kitsch-inspired emotion is not possible without the participation of the viewer; the kitsch-man is complicit in the pretense: "kitsch art is *pretending* to express something, and you, in accepting it, are pretending to feel."[39]

In addition, it is thought to actively exploit these feelings to distract the viewer from more important issues. This is part of the reason why

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[34] McDannell, *Material Christianity*, pp. 34-35.
[35] Heather Hendershot, *Shaking the World For Jesus: Media and Conservative Evangelical Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), pp. 9, 19.
[36] Morgan, *Visual Piety*, p. 24.
[37] Frank Burch Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste: Aesthetics in Religious Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. xi.
[38] Scruton, 'Kitsch and the Modern Predicament'.
[39] Scruton, 'Kitsch and the Modern Predicament'. Italics in original.

religious kitsch deals only in the gentle, positive sentiments rather than the controversial, confrontational points of 'serious' discourse; even though, says Theodor Adorno, the people need relief from boredom they need relief from effort simultaneously.[40] For example, consider the popularity of objects that propagate the idea that "Jesus Loves You". This is a frequent theme of Christian kitsch, and compared to other popular religious media that espouses negative messages such as homophobia, anti-feminism or fear of hellfire, it does not challenge the viewer politically and only lightly tickles the believers' theological position.[41] It may even create the impression that such controversies do not actually exist. Morgan writes that with regard for popular piety, "for most people, it is more important to cope with an oppressive or indifferent world than to resist it".[42]

While it would seem that religious kitsch operates on this immediately superficial and duplicitous level, the finer mechanics of such emotional invocation would suggest that the emotions are in fact based upon a legitimate religious experience. If we follow the logic of Scruton and many others, it is hard to explain the strength of response from kitsch enthusiasts, since kitsch itself is so empty of content, unless they were actually responding to something in their own experience that is triggered by contemplation of the kitsch object. Robert C. Solomon points out that to assume that the object of emotion is the cause mistakes the genuine emotions beyond the image; he gives the example of a saccharine velvet painting of Jesus that is presumed itself to be the object of affection when in actuality the object of affection is God.[43] In this way religious kitsch can be a channel to authentic experience, or at least the memory or nostalgia of such experience. While it is commendable that Scruton attributes such

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[40] Theodor Adorno, quoted in Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, p. 242.

[41] Evangelical Christian media, especially in the United States, commonly tackles controversial issues head on. For example the issue of abortion is openly confronted with Christian t-shirts promoting controversial political agendas with slogans such as 'abortion stops a beating heart' accompanied by a picture of a foetus (http://www.prolifeworld.com/abortion-stops-a-beating-heart-t-shirt-tattoo-design. Accessed 1/03/2015), or addressed in films such as *October Baby*, about an 'abortion survivor', a politically charged way of referring to someone who has survived an attempted abortion through 'God's grace', medicine or adoption (Andrew Erwin and John Erwin, Gravitas and Provident Films, 2011).

[42] Morgan, *Visual Piety*, p. 23.

[43] Solomon, 'On Kitsch and Sentimentality', p. 11.

active agency to consumers of religious kitsch as to be complicit in their own deception because it acknowledges that consumers are not passive in their engagement, lovers of kitsch would hardly be concerned if such engagement returns a positive experience into religious life. The pretense is indeed mutual, but it is entered into willingly and deliberately.

It may be considered that such deliberate self-provocation is perverse.[44] Yet much of this kind of criticism comes from the perspective that the manipulative nature of kitsch somehow violates the autonomy of the rational individual. Deborah Knight comments that these critiques turn on the rhetoric of seduction or assault, provoking emotion that originates elsewhere and the intensity of which cannot be controlled, and she reminds us of Solomon's point that there appears to be no violation when the person is reasoned with.[45] Yet I have argued that religious kitsch is used willingly, despite its deceptive temperament, and so perhaps the better approach is to neither accuse nor excuse kitsch as if it were an animal with carnivorous intentions on our culture and instead accept simply that it operates as a material expression of religious feelings, and not concern ourselves with whether or not the sentiments are genuine or abusive.

Here I turn to the work of Celeste Olalquiaga, who describes the above tactics that kitsch employs in a more neutral manner, terming the relationship of consumer with object as "vicariousness" rather than exploitation or parasitism. For Olalquiaga, this vicariousness stems from the postmodern condition in which "experience is mainly available through signs: things are not lived directly but rather through the agency of a medium, in the consumption of images and objects that replace what they stand for".[46] Kitsch, then, is subject to forces that are affecting culture in general and as such it cannot be singled out among the many examples of cultural volatility and transferability. For Olalquiaga, vicariousness

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[44] Deborah Knight, 'Why We Enjoy Condemning Sentimentality: A Meta-Aesthetic Perspective', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, vol. 57, no. 4 (1999), p. 414.

[45] Knight, 'Why We Enjoy Condemning Sentimentality', p.416. It is interesting to note the gendered nature of the association between the emotions causing violation and reason withstanding such violation, especially if it is considered that kitsch is traditionally feminised in connection with the very sentimentality which turns out to be the weapon of attack. See McDannell, *Material Christianity*, pp. 163-197, for a discussion on the feminisation of religious kitsch.

[46] Celeste Olalquiaga, *Megalopolis: Contemporary Cultural Sensibilities* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), p. 40.

attempts to compensate for the "waning of affect" or emotional detachment experienced in postmodernity, and kitsch is most suitable for these ends because it answers the search for intense thrills and acute emotionality attributed to other times and places.[47] In other words, kitsch lovers, or "aficionados", cannot be blamed for their fascination; they are simply coping with the increasing abstraction of daily life and are finding new opportunities for creating their own articulation of that life. One problem with this postmodern emphasis is that kitsch existed before the postmodern era, and in fact for some theorists, it is inextricably bound to the advent of modernity and modernism.[48] It is interesting though, that modernism fed many of the celebrated critics of kitsch, such as Greenberg and Dorfles, whilst more sympathetic perspectives such as those of Olalquiaga and Solomon all fall firmly within the postmodern era allowing for plurality and cultural relativism.

By this stage I must pause and make explicit any defining characteristics of kitsch that have emerged throughout the preceding discussion. I have by no means compiled a comprehensive list; rather it is more of a sketch that can be used to measure an item of potential kitsch against so that I am better able to base my use of the term on characteristics of the item rather than Scruton's "yuk" feeling. Even though some of the characteristics may appear as negative or unethical, such as the ethical hotspot of commodification, I wish to stress that pointing out such aspects is not the same as using them to discredit an object simply because one disagrees with the cultural characteristic it is embodying. That would be a subjective assessment, and though it may be valid (there are indeed ethical questions raised by commodification), in the end it is less relevant for my purposes because kitsch is commodified whether one likes it or not. The above discussion may be distilled into roughly six points of definition, following the order of the argument so far: 1) Religious kitsch entails an ambiguous or blurred separation of the sacred and profane 2) Religious kitsch is commodified 3) Religious kitsch is used in everyday domestic practice rather than official or exclusively religious contexts – this is a culmination of points one and two 4) Religious kitsch uses imitation and repetition to visually situate itself within an established religious tradition

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[47] Olalquiaga, *Megalopolis*, p. 40.
[48] For example, kitsch is one of Calinescu's "Five Faces of Modernity". See Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, p. 225.

and to replicate the emotional experience of that tradition 5) religious kitsch acts as a shortcut to that emotion which can be immediately accessed through the object without difficulty or effort 6) consumers of religious kitsch are both actively and passively involved in creating its meaning; there may be a degree of fantasy into which consumers are seduced, but they are also able to participate in the construction of that fantasy. Thus theoretically I have an idea of how kitsch operates, but I am yet to consider what it actually *looks* like. For this each point will be briefly considered through concrete examples, for even though I argued that there are general characteristics of kitsch, they do not always manifest in exactly the same ways.

Kitsch in Religious Practice: Christianity and Islam

Studies of Christian kitsch are by far the most accessible, particularly as many of the criticisms dealt with in this article emerge from theological and artistic traditions that embrace religious imagery as a crucial part of the canon of Western art. Similarly, scholars of material cultural studies, when focusing on religion, have tended to consider Christian examples. While not quite a wealth of literature, scholarship on Christian commodities is widely available; although, due to historical and cultural reasons with which have become familiar from the argument above, these studies rarely use the term "kitsch". Instead the everyday objects with Christian content or use are referred to in ways such as "material culture", "visual piety" or "Christian cultural products".[49]

Studying Islamic kitsch is difficult for different reasons. There is very little on Islamic material culture that has not been absorbed into studies of Islamic art which in turn are absorbed into general Islamic studies with a rather historicist methodology exclusive of alternative approaches, so making a focus on aesthetic elements seemingly secondary or superfluous.[50] There is also a tendency to consider all Islamic culture as equivalent to Middle Eastern culture. It is important to note that this is not

[49] See McDannell, *Material Christianity*, Morgan, *Visual Piety*, Hendershot, *Shaking the World for Jesus*, respectively. One notable exception is Olalquiaga, *Megalopolis*, in which she freely uses the term 'kitsch' to describe religious artefacts, and to her credit is able to do so without conveying historical or cultural prejudice. See her chapter there, 'Holy Kitschen: Collecting Religious Junk from the Street', pp. 36-55.

[50] Oliver Leaman, *Islamic Aesthetics: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p. vii.

always the case, and Islamic culture varies across times and places and can be distinct from nationally or culturally specific ideas. However, Islamic culture is, like all cultures in a postmodern globalised world, subject to the forces of commodification, and the assumption that commodification is somehow antithetical to Islam is unsound.[51] There are what Jeanette Jouili calls the 'halal arts', where pious Muslims express their religion and other aspects of their lives through art and material culture.[52] Hence, Islam is prone to forces of 'kitschification' in the same ways other religions are, where the kitsch process involves a homogenisation of aesthetic and cultural elements, and so it is in fact reflective of the kitsch perspective that diversity should be simplified and flattened. So while there are cultural and aesthetic differences in Islamic art from different regions, when one walks into an Islamic bookshop, for example, an azan (call to prayer) clock from Turkey may be indistinguishable from an azan clock from Pakistan.

In addition, there is the widespread assumption that Islam prohibits figural representation. This is problematic because it is not necessarily true; Islam's relationship with imagery is exceedingly complex and there are no hard and fast rules pertaining to the representation of figures. Even images of the prophet Muhammad exist through the history of Islamic art, something that is considered to be explicitly forbidden.[53] There is in fact no specific proscription in the Quran concerning figural representation but extreme caution is advised in the hadith.[54] The nature of this concern is ambiguous, and in keeping with the task at hand of avoiding judgements as to whether such images are right or wrong, the focus here will remain on the way that such images exemplify kitsch rather than their ethical standing within the tradition. Clement Greenberg's maxim to avoid the figural image

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[51] Yael Navaro-Yashin, 'The Market for Identities: Secularism, Islamism and Commodities', in *Fragments of Culture: The Everyday of Modern Turkey*, ed. Deniz Kandiyoti (London: I. B. Tauris, 2001), p. 222.

[52] Jeanette Jouili, 'Halal Arts: What's in a Concept?', *Material Religion*, vol. 8, no. 3 (2012), pp. 342-343.

[53] Emma Graham-Harrison, 'Drawing the Prophet: Islam's Hidden History of Muhammad Images', *The Guardian*, (11/01/2015), http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jan/10/drawing-prophet-islam-muhammad-images. Accessed 27/02/2015. Graham-Harrison refers to both historical and modern examples of art that depicts Muhammad, such as a 15th Century illuminated manuscript from Afghanistan and a public mural in Tehran painted in 2008.

[54] Patricia L. Baker, *Islam and the Religious Arts* (New York: Continuum, 2004), p. 37.; *Sahih Muslim*, vol. 3, no. 5271.

or you will land yourself in kitsch holds strange parallels to Islam in that we may say avoid the figural image or you will land yourself in *shirk* (idolatry).[55] Yet as we have seen, figural images, while extremely common, are not necessary to make an object kitsch. Thus Islamic kitsch manifests quite differently to Christian kitsch which often revolves around portrayals of Jesus, Mary or other saints, and even at times figural representations of God himself, but it still functions fully as religious objects. Islamic kitsch, as available through the same channels as other forms of religious kitsch such as bookstores, online religious retailers, markets and so on, has an identifiable aesthetic that relies more on calligraphic decoration and other non-figurative embellishment such as (fake) gold and silver. One may purchase Islamic jewellery, wall decorations, door bells that greet visitors Islamically with "assalamualaikum peace be upon you", or trinkets to hang from the car rearview mirror.[56] However, it is unlikely that you would find humanistic figurines such as those found in Christian kitsch.[57]

My focus now shifts to two particular examples that hopefully can illustrate the points of my discussion. The first is the Christian example, I will refer to it as a "Jesus light switch" (Figure 2), a cover that can be fixed onto any domestic light switch, portraying Jesus with his arms around two small children, molded in cream plastic. This example has been selected in part to balance out the excessive criticism of this light switch that has proliferated across the internet, in which the image is taken humourously as a picture of paedophilic intent. Information about this object is scarce, but I will make two assumptions about it; firstly that it was made with serious intent, and secondly that it belongs to the middle decades of the twentieth century. The second example continues on the household lighting theme: an electric lamp (Figure 3), purchased by the author from a local Islamic

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[55] Greenberg, quoted in Scruton, 'Kitsch and the Modern Predicament', para. 3.

[56] For just one example see the azan clocks for sale at Darussalam Online Islamic Bookstore, http://dsbooks.com.au/islamic-essentials/azan-clocks.html. Accessed 1/03/2015.

[57] One notable exception is the Islamic Barbie doll. There are several versions, with the most well-known being the Fulla doll. I have strong reservations about calling a Muslim Barbie kitsch, as she is a highly politicised and meaningful product that engages multiple discourses and has a deliberate agenda. See for example the kinds of academic treatment she has received: Faegheh Shirazi, 'Islam and Barbie: The Commodification of Hijabi Dolls', *Islamic Perspective*, vol.3 (2010), pp. 10-27 and Amina Yaqin, 'Islamic Barbie: The Politics of Gender and Performativity', *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body & Culture*, vol. 11, no. 2-3 (2007), pp. 173-188.

bookstore, that contains within it a montage of Islamic images, namely the Ka'aba and pilgrims at Mecca, the Quran, and stylized calligraphy announcing the ninety-nine names of Allah. The image is lit up and rotates inside the lamp when in operation. Information about this object is also scarce, but again, in keeping with the flattening and abstracting of commodification, this does not pose too great a problem for the meaning of a kitsch object should be apparent from its superficial qualities.

Figure 2: Jesus Light Switch. Image retrieved 19/2/2015 from https://www.pinterest.com/pin/68328119316651489.

Figure 3: *Islamic Kitsch* (Ka'aba lamp back right), photograph by Elisha McIntyre 2015.

Sacred/Profane, Commodification and the Everyday

Both Christianity and Islam have elements within their traditions that consider the visual representation of the divine as theologically suspect. The reasoning behind this is complex. Images may improperly stimulate the senses and distract the believer from the essence of the word of God. As God is the sole source of creation and beauty, images may instill in their creator a false sense of pride or in the viewer an inappropriate admiration for human creativity.[58] In particular there is the difficulty of representing in visual form God himself when he is considered to be formless or at least too glorious to be appropriately depicted by the humble human imagination. In Christianity, the fact that God himself became human in form could present a justification for the ability to accurately represent him. Yet Muhammad was in human form also, and even though he was not

[58] Asli Gocer, 'A Hypothesis Concerning the Character of Islamic Art', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 60, no. 4 (1999), pp. 690-91.

divine, his image has been repressed more so than that of Jesus. However, the main concern of religious kitsch is not accuracy but affectivity. This means that regardless of the content religious kitsch seeks religious devotion, and the everyday form of the object dictates that the sacred will inevitably come into contact with the profane, despite what is said in abstract theological debates.

The Jesus light switch dissolves the point at which Jesus is too holy to be contacted through an everyday object. The immanence of God and his involvement in the direction of everyday affairs means that there is little separation between the sacred and profane, one can exist within and direct the other. Thus Jesus is theologically the light of the world[59] and so should be practically accessible as the light of the room. Surely this word play was not missed by the switch's creators, and it displays a self-awareness that kitsch often exhibits. But while this intentionality causes us to laugh, it is also designed in all seriousness to remind believers of their faith commitment and obedience, as the fine print across the light reads "honour thy mother and thy father". It truly reminds believers that Jesus is biblically the light, even if they cringe at the obviousness of the reference. This is a religious act, similar to a religious pendant worn around the neck, when by virtue of its everydayness the religiosity of the object is so deeply embedded that one forgets it is there, until an everyday act such as turning on the light forces recognition and subsequent remembrance of both the literal light switch and what the light switch represents.

What allows this access to daily experience of religion in the domestic space is the commodification of religion, the process that creates an environment in which it is acceptable (and profitable) for religious individuals to buy objects into which they may invest their religious activity. Gregory Starrett argues in his study of Islamic commodities in Egypt that religious commodities are only religious once they cease to become commodities, that is they are b(r)ought over the threshold into to the private/domestic sphere.[60] He argues that the objects are able to exist as exchangeable objects, equal to "chocolates and flowers" because the objects themselves are only activated once they are bought by a Muslim and thus not contaminated whilst in the state of hopefully temporary

[59] John 8:12.
[60] Gregory Starrett, 'The Political Economy of Religious Commodities in Cairo', *American Anthropologist*, vol. 97, no. 1(1995), p. 59.

commodification.[61] The commodification of such objects does not automatically mean profanation because the objects themselves are treated with the utmost respect. The Ka'aba lamp, because it contains the holy names of Allah should be given pride of place and be displayed above all other objects. It should also never come into contact with impurity, for example, it should theoretically not be used in a bathroom.[62] Just to complicate things, I may ask whether the Ka'ba lamp sitting upon my non-Muslim desk was in actuality *more* religious and less of a commodity when it was on the shelf in an Islamic bookstore in Sydney, presumably intended for purchase by a Muslim who would "activate" the religious power of the lamp, whilst in reality it has been totally removed from that religiosity by its position on my desk and even its incorporation into this study. This question is further confirmation that the separation of sacred and profane is ambiguous in these objects and it is their function in the everyday that dictates their religiosity.

Imitation and Emotion

The figure on the light switch is immediately recognisable as Jesus, not because there is any explicit label announcing his identity, but because there exists an equally, if not more powerfully, legible language of signs and symbols. One becomes fluent in this language by exposure to repetition of similar imagery, and in living in a Christianised Western world the prolific image already discussed above of Jesus as a Caucasian man with flowing locks and beard, his large blue eyes expressing friendliness, benevolence and above all tenderness, cannot be escaped. Despite the absence of colour in the Jesus light switch (generally unusual for kitsch), the image can still be connected with the tradition of images that have gone before it. Certain symbols such as the sacred heart around his neck identify the object further as Catholic, although it must be pointed out that the heart appears to be a necklace rather than the burning heart of Christ himself that is typical of Catholic imagery. This actually makes the object more kitsch because of its lack of concern over the detail; all that is sought here is the immediate identification as a sacred heart, something that is achieved purely by imitation of other established religious devotional imagery. Similarly the Ka'aba lamp draws upon the extensive history of Islamic

[61] Starrett, 'The Political Economy', p. 54.
[62] Starrett, 'The Political Economy', p. 56.

calligraphy, and in particular exploits its position as the bearer of divine revelation and thus its extreme holiness.[63] By including the word of Allah, the Ka'aba lamp is taken beyond its apparent function of household furnishing. This is achieved through replication of the religious devotion that is ordinarily reserved for Quranic text.

It has been argued that it is the replication of the emotion attached to these established traditions that is the main if not defining feature of religious kitsch, and it is at this point that I wish to venture that Christian and Islamic kitsch diverge. Both incorporate the techniques that incite immediate and effortless religious devotion, but the nature of the emotion elicited differs in kind. While of course there are indeed exceptions to this generalisation, for the most part Islamic kitsch aspires to invoke the glory of Allah while Christian kitsch tends to emphasise the love of God. In both traditions these two elements of the divine are present (consider that Allah is known as the most Merciful and the most Loving as well as the Glorious and the Sovereign, while Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Light as well as the Lamb) but the story told by religious kitsch gives a particular picture. Christian kitsch is predominantly what Solomon calls "sweet" kitsch, that is, "art that appeals unsubtly and unapologetically to the softer, 'sweeter' sentiments".[64] This is why much of general kitsch theory can be applied to Christian kitsch because we see in it familiar tactics such as figural depictions of children with large teardrop eyes painted or sculpted in pastel, holding puppies or alternatively their hands folded in prayer. According to Brown these kinds of "lite" worship can allow for softer and less critical feelings to emerge that may otherwise be squeezed out by more demanding forms of worship.[65]

On the Jesus light switch these softer feelings manifest in the tenderness of Jesus' arms guiding and protecting the children who are depicted as little and 'cute', dressed in Sunday best and displaying all the attributes of the well behaved children desired by the caption across the top of the switch that reads "Honour thy Father and Mother". The image guides the believer to a sweet understanding of Jesus without much effort or

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[63] Lois Lamya Al-Faruqi, *Islam and Art* (Islamabad: National Hijra Council, 1985), p. 33.
[64] Solomon, 'On Kitsch and Sentimentality', p. 1.
[65] Brown, *Good Taste, Bad Taste, and Christian Taste*, p. 20. See also his insightful analysis of this kind of "sweet" Christian kitsch in his discussion on the Precious Moments Chapel, pp. 128-159.

investment. This is of interest in relation to the internet hype surrounding the image; a reaction that I would argue actually highlights the light switch's kitschness. An online search for Jesus light switch returns innumerable results focusing on the apparent hilarity of the alternative reading of this image which sees Jesus as exposing himself to these children.[66] Yet because kitsch is always intended in seriousness it is never ironic, thus finding such humour in the object actually reinforces its kitschness through showing up its earnestness. The sentimentality of the kitsch object obscures the ease with which this emotion is reached and also distracts from serious issues, what Johan Cilliers calls an "'aesthetical' ideal to cleanse and sanitise life from all that smacks of suffering".[67] Thus the tender and loving Christ is here taken in all seriousness to have a completely appropriate relationship with the children for two reasons; firstly, the tradition of images and ideologies that the light switch is referencing tells the viewer that Jesus had such a relationship with children, and secondly, in true kitsch style the viewer is seeking only the immediate and apparent meaning. In addition there are factors of faith and blasphemy and intention and context, which would prevent a devout Christian from reading the image in the way that is so apparent to non-Christian viewers. This is beyond the scope of this article, but it brings me to the point that the positive feelings evoked by the light switch are able to sublimate any alternative readings of the image. Most obviously, the issue of paedophilia is the alternative, serious reading of this image. The original shallowness of the image interestingly works to make available only one meaning, the one created by the tools of imitation and uncritical emotion. Deeper thinking is discouraged, and the true kitsch-man who would appreciate this light switch for what was its presumably original intention would simply fail to notice its alternative readings, although care must be taken here regarding the old elitist habit that assumes the reason for this obtuseness would be lack of sophistication or education.

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[66] Comments on this image posted on various websites commonly make explicit sexual references, for example, "Jesus is showing his boner to two children" (Slut Machine, 'Jesus Christ', at http://jezebel.com/349758/jesus-christ, 28/1/2008. Accessed 19/2/2015), or even sexual puns such as "now that's a res-erection!" (Jimbo Horsefly, at 'Jesus Light Switch', *Bore Me*, at http://www.boreme.com/posting.php?id=15394. Accessed 19/2/15).

[67] Johan Cilliers, 'The Unveiling of Life', p. 2.

It is possible that the avoidance of figural representation in Islamic kitsch contributes to the paucity of "sweet" kitsch in Islam because the sentiments cannot rely on emotive cues based on tender facial expressions or loving body language and so on. Instead the imagery tends to be more abstract and as such is devoid of much of the tenderness elicited by kitsch's communion with all humanity. Humanity is not the subject of Islamic kitsch, and whereas Christian kitsch will reach its arms out to the believer in a loving embrace, Islamic kitsch tends to act as a signifier of Allah's transcendence despite its form in everyday objects. This is reinforced by the importance of position and treatment of the object as well as its visual content. The Ka'aba lamp montage depicts objects alone, even the images of pilgrims are reduced and unclear, turned into a motif instead of an appeal to pilgrim communitas. The mosques, the Ka'aba and the Quran, along with the calligraphic script, float across the surface of the lamp and when it is in operation the rotation of the images creates a transcendent timelessness. Often images of the Quran show light streaming out of the pages of the book, and this effect is replicated when the light of the lamp flows out from the behind the image. The viewer is brought out of the hypnotic effect only by the whir of the internal motor that reminds one that the light is generated by a bulb instead of the luminance of Allah, although this is the effect that makes the object kitsch.

Agency

The final point of definition regards the participation of believers in the creation of kitsch. An object enters the state of kitsch only if its engagement with the viewer conforms to the characteristics noted above since kitsch cannot be intentionally produced.[68] This involves the believer taking the object not as kitsch but as a serious object that may legitimately be incorporated into their personal religious practice. This may indeed involve some deception. However, it also may imbue the believer with the powers of kitsch object itself; that is the ability to selectively sublimate undesired aspects of the object and take from it those that are of benefit. The selection not only of objects but specific aspects of chosen objects is part of the postmodern believer's personal pastiche in which the use of kitsch becomes unique and unrepeatable.[69] In this respect kitsch is actively

[68] Scruton, 'Kitsch and the Modern Predicament', para. 28.
[69] Olalquiaga, *Megalopolis*, p. 38.

used in identity formation. For Christians the display of the Jesus light switch in the home re-embeds the presence God in daily life.[70] For Muslims the display of a Ka'aba lamp may connect them to the greater Islamic *ummah* and help defragment an identity that may have been disrupted by immigration or media misrepresentation.[71]

Conclusion

Despite the difficulties in adopting the term "kitsch", its use need not be avoided when applied with an awareness of its actual meanings as they stand undistorted by the prism of Western cultural elitism. Upon deeper examination kitsch and religious kitsch are indeed discrete categories that exhibit characteristics identifiable through the object's structural, cultural and religious qualities. These qualities reflect an ambiguous separation of sacred and profane, commodification, use in everyday religious practice, imitation of aesthetics and emotion and personal agency of the believer. The worth of religious kitsch is directly related to its success not only as an image but as a *religious* image, and its popularity demonstrates that for many believers these objects fully function religiously and aesthetically. This is by no means a comprehensive study, and I would like to conclude it with some recommendations for further study.

Firstly, there is a need for studies that do not shy away from using the term "kitsch" as I have described it here, where the word is not used as a synonym for bad taste or poor quality but rather as a term to cover objects that are actively used by believers to bring the sacred into their everyday, material lives. In addition, kitsch should be understood as distinct from "material culture" or "religious cultural products", since there are aesthetic and ethical implications that apply to kitsch that do not necessarily apply to these other categories. Secondly, I ask whether completely commercialised religious objects (for example Christian t-shirts that play on pop culture) could still be considered kitsch because they have a consciousness about them that defies our understanding of kitsch's earnestness and rejection of irony. Lastly, the area of Islamic kitsch is drastically understudied in

[70] Binkley, 'Kitsch as a Repetitive System', p. 135.
[71] Joann D'Alisera, 'I ♥ Islam: Popular Religious Commodities, Sites of Inscription, and Transnational Sierra Leonean Identity', *Journal of Material Culture*, vol. 6, no.1 (2001), p. 98.

relation to the quantity of it that exists and the reasons for this inattention should form part of these studies.