

Praise the Lord!

Carl De Keyzer travelled the United States for a year to document the flourishing religious groups and gained the impression that God as a product is the gap in the American market of the '90s

In the summer of 1990 Carl De Keyzer, accompanied by his wife and three-year-old son, takes the plane to Los Angeles, California. There he buys a camping car — which will be his home for a year — and immediately heads for the northern states, before winter sets in. He has only one subject on his agenda: religious groups. The United States is a breeding ground for about 3700 different religious groups. Religion is an essential part of the American way of life, if only because of the particular attention given to it by movie stars, pop artists, politicians and the media. Churches are not subsidised in the US but they are exempt from taxes. Otherwise they have to be fully self-supporting. Most churches are doing well, very well. It appears that God as a product is the gap in the American market of the '90s; hence, *God Incorporated*.

Travelling month after month from one state to another, De Keyzer has photographed Americans in their religious experience. His approach is both aesthetical and critical, his attitude is one of surprise and relativisation. 'I was shocked to find that religion plays such an important part in American society, that it was so widely spread. One year long I wondered why Americans are so intense and emotional in their religious experience. I have found no answer to my questions, but then why should I? I am no philosopher. I just pointed

• Top: Mass baptism in a prefab swimming pool in Dodgers Stadium, Los Angeles. Right: Actors dressed as angels for the First Presbyterian Church of De Bary's annual Christmas pageant, De Bary, Florida.





and registered things, in my own way.'

Here is an extract from De Keyzer's diary which appears in *God Inc.*, the book which accompanies the Photographers' Gallery exhibition, opening tomorrow, 26 June.

JUNE 29th, 1991
HICO, TEXAS
KU KLUX KLAN RALLY.

Grand Wizard Tom Robb told me at

the previous KKK meeting where and when they would have one of their rare cross burnings. Or rather cross lightings, as the cross is a shining beacon for a world astray.

I arrive in Hico, a small town in the heart of Texas, a day early. The legend has it that Billy the Kid lived here, but that is something every town asserts. There is one gas station and one motel. Without really knowing why, I decide not to stay the night, and I check into a motel 20 miles from

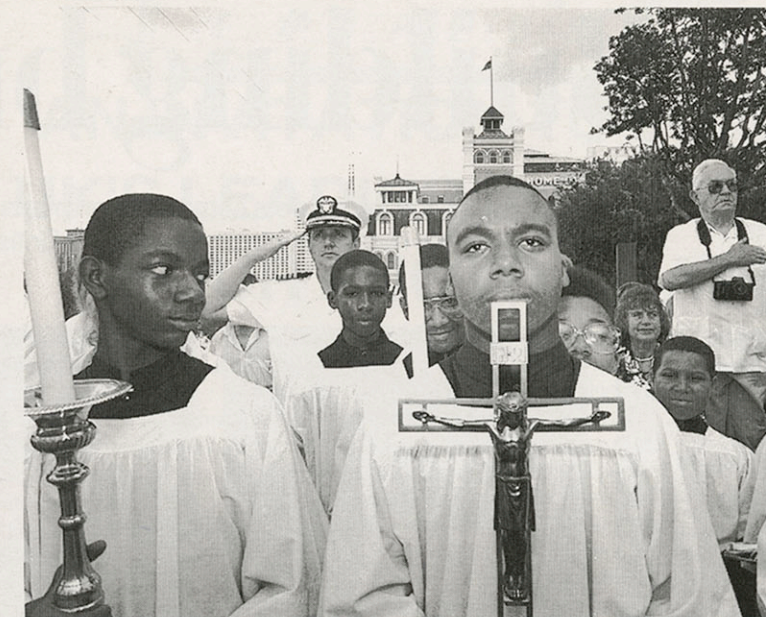
there. In the morning I learn that the Hico motel was full of Klansmen and that someone emptied a double-barreled shotgun from a riding pick-up truck on it.

A few miles from the rendezvous police cars wait near a hamburger restaurant. The rally is to be held in some fields, on private property. A large KKK RALLY sign serves as entry. A thirty-foot-high cross, wrapped in burlap, lays on a hilltop. Jerry-cans filled with gasoline are ready.

In a clearing in the woods near a stage decorated with riding Klansmen a few tables covered with KKK souvenirs. There are no horses available tonight. They will make do without cavalry. Half of the public consists of young skinheads in black T-shirts decorated with skulls and SS insignia. I recognise a few skinheads from the Nazi church in Idaho and from the Fourth Smith meeting. They sure travel around a lot. Or is it that the Klan has no more members?

Usually I wear black duds, but for the occasion I put on a white shirt. Just so as to avoid a misunderstanding. But it appears that some of the heavies, a kind of supervisors, are dressed as I am in white shirt, black pants and black shoes. I am even requested to pour gasoline on the cross. I turn them down.

Later I get into some trouble with the Grand Dragon of Texas who feels I make too many pictures of the public during the speeches. He wants to



• Far left: Revival at the Church of God of Prophecy, New Smyrna Beach, Florida. Left: Singing 'God bless America' during a blessing of the Mississippi River by a Catholic bishop, New Orleans. Middle: Religious parade during the Mardi Gras carnival on Jackson Square and Bourbon Street by pentecostal churches and preachers, New Orleans. Bottom: Ku Klux Klan 'cross lighting' ceremony, Hico, Texas. All pictures: Carl De Kyzer/Magnum.

smash my camera and take out the film. Fortunately Grand Wizard Tom Robb intervenes. I talked to his son earlier, who thinks I am an OK-guy. To make it up to me, they present me with a KKK pin.

The speeches are mainly directed against gays. They are the new scapegoats. The annual Gay Parade in San Francisco with a quarter of a million participants in particular arouses a lot of contempt. They don't fulminate against blacks any more, as they have left the area for some time.

At dusk a few campers and motor-homes drive up the field. After a while, genuine Klansmen get out, clad in white gowns with pointed caps. The cross is pulled upright with a tractor and all the gowned Klansmen enter the woods. After waiting half an hour in complete darkness I see them — there are about a hundred — returning in group from the woods. Every one of them in white with pointed cap. Only the Grand Wizard and the Grand Dragon wear black.

The torches are drenched with more gasoline and fire is passed in a circle around the cross. The Grand Wizard lights the large cross and sets the group moving in a large circle around the mighty torch. The ceremony is simple but fairly impressive. The circle changes directions a few times and once in a while torches are waved. A quarter of an hour later the cross has almost gone.

Now they all turn towards me and I fear the worst, as I have flashed a lot during the ceremony. But instead of knocking my camera away, they give me their own pocket-sized cameras and pose before the cross. All the left arms are raised together — not the right one like the Nazis, the left one is closer to the heart — and remain upright until all the pictures are taken. Even when I load up a fresh roll of film they keep standing for minutes without moving.

God Inc., photographs by Carl De Keyzer, is on show at the Photographers' Gallery, 5 Great Newport Street, London WC1, from 26 June until 22 August.

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City types talk of two kinds of corporate growth: companies increase in size either organically or by acquisition. Organic growth derives from investment in the business, a little thin on the ground at present; acquisition is simply the buying and bringing in of other businesses to the fold. At times such as now acquisition can prove an efficient way of growing, with many bargains to be found by any company with the means to go shopping. Very often you can get a great deal more than effectively you pay for. Thus in any sector there may be a trend towards fewer operators, and in the business of stock photography, as reported in our *News* pages last week, there is also technological pressure to contend with.

When Kodak and Philips announced the far off, but nevertheless impending, arrival of Photo-CD, all those many months ago, they heralded the medium as a mass-market product which would enhance the High Street d&p business. Philips' vested interest was in the technology and selling manufacturing licences to the traditional hi-fi makers. Kodak

no doubt shared this but had the additional interest in maintaining a market for colour negative film. This Journal was not alone in concluding that the commercial applications would be realised more readily, including the storage and distribution of images on CD-ROM by picture libraries, dovetailing neatly with the established trend towards desktop repro and publishing in its various guises. In no time at all Kodak had acquired The Image Bank, the world's largest stock library.

For a picture library to go with the digital flow and remain competitive will require a substantial investment. There could have been better times than now to be asked for that, although already stock images are being distributed in this way. The alternative is to offer material so specialised that you have little or no competition. The picture market is diverse and exploitable niches will continue for the foreseeable future. But although digital distribution will bring practical benefits to those who use it, the days of the small general picture library appear to be numbered.



God's Stateside disciples . . .

After the strip light installations of Marysia Lewandowska, the Bill Brandt room at the Photographers' Gallery swings back with a remarkable collection of black-and-white images, documenting the myriad religious groups in the United States.

God Inc. by Magnum nominee Carl De Keyzer collects the fruits of a year's travels through the States on the trail of such phenomena as the Church of Jesus Christ Aryan Nation, the neo-pagan Rainbow People, and the hellfire rantings of Preacher Preston, the Baptist. The book accompanying the exhibition supports the images with diary recollections of some of the bizarre experiences undergone on the trip. The picture shows a young preacher giving a bible to a homeless person during the Mardi Gras carnival in New Orleans.

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