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GOD'S OWN COUNTRY

Widely regarded as the archetypal materialist society, the United States is in fact one of the most God-fearing countries on earth. The Belgian photographer CARL DE KEYZER spent more than a year studying the many strange forms of American Christianity. Text by NICHOLAS VON HOFFMAN

Members of the First Presbyterian Church of De Bary, Florida, in costume for a Christmas pageant

Carl De Keyzer's photographs hint at the varieties of American religious experience. But, if pictures don't lie, they can inadvertently mislead, so appreciation of these compelling photographs may lure one to erroneous conclusions.

While religion in America may often appear – and, indeed, sometimes is – a coarse manifestation of vulgarity on the fringes of society, that's not what all of it, or even most of it, is. The numbers paint a different story, for they show that it is the agnostic who is on the American social fringe. Even in far north-west Oregon, the least God-fearing state in the Union, 83 per cent of the population claim some sort of religious affiliation.

More than 90 per cent of the American people identify themselves with one of the hundreds of Christian denominations in the United States. Recent immigrants from the Middle East and Asia are overwhelmingly Christian, so that Islam, Buddhism or Hinduism only weakly percolate through American religious life. At 11 o'clock on any Sunday morning 40 to 50 per cent of the

population (that is, between 100 and 125 million people) will be found in a building with a Cross on the steeple.

Furthermore, church-going is only a minor aspect of religion in the United States. Millions of people are involved in charitable groups which, taken together, inject a Christian component into every sphere of activity. They range across the widest spectrum of interests and include such organisations as the Christian Business Men's Committee, the Christian Legal Society, the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, the Christian Chiropractors Association, the Fellowship of Christian Magicians, the Fellowship of Christian Peace Officers, the Bible Memory Association and the American Bible Society. Some of these organisations have hundreds of thousands of members and budgets well into eight figures.

The United States remains an actively Christian society, a fact which may not be sufficiently appreciated by Europeans and others when contemplating this large, noisy nation. What is so baffling is why, when Christianity seems to be dying out in many

other societies, it flourishes in America as cheerfully as the green bay tree in the Thirty-seventh Psalm.

Part of the answer is to be found in the First Amendment to the American Constitution, the one which guarantees freedom of religion. Equally important in its effects is the fact that the Amendment separated church and state in the young Republic. By the 1820s the churches had been disestablished and were consequently forced to hustle for their bread and butter. American Christianity, unable to rely on tax dollars from the government, has had constantly to change and shape itself in order to please its customers.

Of course, there are some churchmen who would like to see some form of government assistance for religion. There has been some nibbling at the First Amendment through agitation to make prayer compulsory in schools, but many church people are as ardently in favour of the separation between church and state as are the most zealous secularists. This is especially true of nonconformist denominations, which have





experienced so much persecution at the hands of established religion that they want to remain as remote from government as possible.

Thanks to the First Amendment, no institutions in American life are more responsive to their members than the churches. One of the reasons, not the only one to be sure, that American trade unions have languished and shrunk in size and power is that in the Thirties they enjoyed establishment privileges. Laws in some industrialised states making union membership, or at least the payment of union dues, a condition of employment robbed the labour organisations of any incentive to try to please their members.

The dues of American union members are deducted from their pay cheques. Churches get their money by passing the basket. It makes a great difference in the relationship between officers and the rank and file. When church members are unhappy, church officials do something about it.

Because of its flexibility and responsiveness, Christianity in America isn't frozen in shape and content and geography. The past 50 years have seen a massive decline in denominational allegiance. A third of the nation's Christians regularly attend churches of denominations they didn't grow up in, a great change from 50 years ago, while divorce, contraception and abortion are now as prevalent among Roman Catholics as among Protestants.

During the past half-century or so the traditional animosity between Protestants and Roman Catholics has all but disappeared. Just the other day Cardinal Roger Mahony, the Archbishop of Los Angeles, preached in the pulpit of the Tower of Power, the all-glass Crystal Cathedral opposite the gates of Disneyland where the "televangelist" Dr Robert Schuller broadcasts his weekly services. Not many years ago such an appearance would have been unthinkable.

The Roman Catholic Church in the United States is becoming hardly distinguishable from a highly liturgical Protestant Church. Latin is gone, the altars have been pulled away from the back walls and turned into communion tables, and, although official teaching cannot be formally changed, there is tacit acceptance among many American Catholics of things, such as contraception and divorce, which

Beach evangelism during 'Bike Week' at Daytona Beach, Florida



Above: Communion at the Circle Mission Church in Philadelphia



Below: A mass baptism of Jehovah's Witnesses at the Los Angeles Dodgers' baseball stadium





Left: Members of an Assembly of God congregation in Dallas, Texas, praying before a rehearsal of their Passion Play

Below: A member of the Sons of God motorcycle club preaching in a bar in Daytona Beach, Florida, during 'Bike Week'



Magnum

once divided them from the Protestants.

If judged by the number of years they spend at schools and colleges, churchgoers are no less educated than non-churchgoers. The idea that they are poor, ignorant and rural is out of date. Some are, of course, but millions aren't. Old-fashioned Christian fundamentalism died out in the early Thirties, and its place has now been taken by a Bible-centred evangelical conservatism which has, to some extent, penetrated almost every denomination and sect. American evangelical religion can sometimes appear tasteless and stupid, but it is a far cry from the Ku Klux Klan. Evangelicals, descended as they are from the mainstream of American Protestantism, are socially conservative but they are not racists or hate-mongers. You will never see them marching on Gay Pride Day, but nor are they generally infected by virulent homophobia.

In the past few years, scandals involving sex or money and ill-conceived forays into politics have weakened or destroyed some of the most famous television ministers, but the prediction that such developments would weaken the standing of Christianity in the national life was wrong. America remains Christian, and those who fail to understand that will fail to understand America. ●

'God Inc', an exhibition of photographs by Carl De Keyzer, opens at the Photographers' Gallery, Great Newport Street, London WC2, on 26 June