

FRAMING COMMUNITY

Magnum Photos, 1947–Present



Carl de Keyzer

God, Inc. (1990), 1992

Over the span of a year in early 1990, Belgian-born photographer, Carl de Keyzer, set out on a sort of religious journey across the United States. Joining a group of Catholic pilgrims on a tour bus in New York City, and ending with a rally of the Ku Klux Klan in Arkansas, he documented religious communities across the country, examining how they shaped society at large. While the series hinges on the search for community within tightly knit religious sects, it is more broadly an interrogation of the possibility of community in a society where spectacle and capital have become the dominant and naturalized ideologies. Through the lens of a performative nationalism and a commodified religion, *God, Inc.* (fig. 35) uses humor and irony to show a population that seeks transcendence in an age of alienation, all the while teetering on the precipice of yet another explosion of military violence as the U.S. ramped up for its first invasion of Iraq.

As de Keyzer says: "At the time of the first Gulf War a lot of generals and military people were present during religious services giving testimonies and inciting people to be patriots. American flags were everywhere. Saddam was on the cover of many books and magazines pictured as the real devil, Satan. Nationalism has always been sort of a state religion but in 1990–91, the border between the two was non-existent."¹ The photographer's formal juxtaposition of patriotic and religious ceremonies gives an insidious sense that God and nation have taken on a single signification in the political and cultural landscape of the U.S.

At a blessing of the Mississippi River, several young men in robes, holding elaborate crosses, are flanked by men in military salute (fig. 36). The image of a war veteran holding two young girls at the Arlington Memorial during the national anthem (see fig. 17, p. 26)

echoes the enraptured gaze of a young man and woman at the Crystal Cathedral in Anaheim, California. Locked in an embrace, they are captured in a dumbstruck expression looking upward (fig. 37). Epitomizing the Disneyfication of religious ceremony, this immense Cathedral is a manifestation of a spiritual practice that resonates with Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* (1967). A sixty-by-ninety-foot U.S. flag hangs, in addition to an enormous jumbotron on which garish preachers proselytize to the crowds. Whether the audience stares at the jumbotron, the giant flag, or the shimmering massive windows of the Cathedral, the impression of a marketable transcendence is striking.

While the photographs are obviously performative, they are not staged by the photographer, but rather by his subjects participating in religious gatherings. At Palmyra, New York, where the Church of the Latter Day Saints stages a pageant depicting the Book of Mormon and the life of their prophet Joseph Smith, the theatrical nature of the series and the absurdity of the spectacle come to a crescendo. Mormon practitioners dress as Indigenous Americans and hand out color photographs of Jesus to the crowds, many of whom, de Keyzer says, come simply for the show (fig. 38).

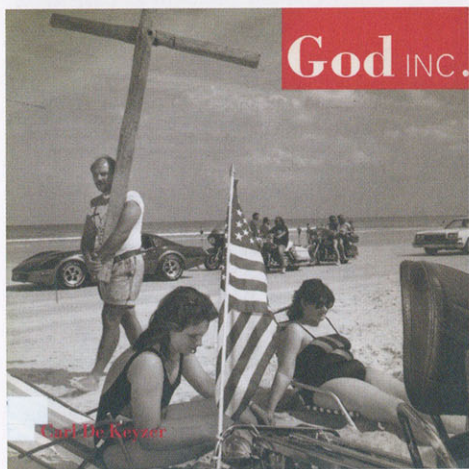


FIG. 35 Carl de Keyzer, *God, Inc.* (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Focus, 1992).



FIG. 36 Carl de Keyzer, *Blessing of the River, Mississippi River, New Orleans, 1990.*

It is this strange mix of documentary photography and fantasy that grounds de Keyzer's later work in *Moments Before the Flood* (2012) and *Higher Ground* (2016). Here the photographer continues to use dark humor and theater to address the looming questions of our current period.

While *God, Inc.* makes it clear that large sections of the U.S. public are looking for, and perhaps finding, a sense of community through religion, the resulting impression is deeply troubling. In the era of late capitalism, a time of overwhelming alienation, division, anxiety and stratification, it seems that this commodified spiritual practice is at best a poor stand-in for meaningful connection. — Stewart Stout

¹ E-mail message I received from the photographer on March 24, 2017.



FIG. 37 Carl de Keyzer, *The Crystal Cathedral, Anaheim, California, 1989.*



FIG. 38 Carl de Keyzer, *The Hill Cumorah Pageant, The Latter Day Saints, Palmyra, New York, 1990.*