

# Lens that follows the eyes of God

Carl de Keyzer's photographs capture religious life on society's margins.  
Tim Hilton reports

SOMETIMES, not often, a photographer appears whose work is so eloquent and informative that it sets the agenda for future writers, whether they be reporters, political analysts or academics. Carl de Keyzer is one of them. His exhibition at the Photographers' Gallery is called *God Inc*, and presents a surprising account of an important part of American life.

Yet, as is the way with photography, these prints both dramatize one sort of information and withhold another sort. Here is one camerawork demanding that articles and books should be written on the same subject.

In fact, De Keyzer does provide a book, also called *Cod Inc*. (available from the gallery at £24.95), and it tells us how he approached the subject of religion in the USA. De Keyzer is a young star of photojournalism and the Magnum agency, and this cooperative has surely been an influence on him. He was born in 1958 at Kortrijk in Belgium, won prizes of various sorts and then started doing reportage photography published in book form. They have been of India and the former Soviet Union. Telling stuff, but not exactly original.

Next though, De Keyzer got himself to New York and set out to look for God. First he went on a bus trip with a group of elderly ladies, taking off from the Church of St Agnes in 43rd Street, destination Lourdes, Litchfield, Connecticut. They have lunch, contribute to a lottery and though they are fate for mass—well, here is de Keyzer's diary entry: "By general request we do get a Way of the Cross and a mass introduced by a tape with bells ringing and hallelujah. The priests come out of a Tyrolean chalet across a small concrete and wooden bridge towards the kneeling ladies. These drop each at least \$10 in the collection plate, all churches here are self-supporting. After the harvest comes the Way of the Cross. With a totally unnecessary megaphone the priest enforces his words."

Going back to New York Father Shelley takes the microphone and entertains the pilgrims with songs like *My Way*, *New York, New York*, and *God Bless America*. Here, then, is de Keyzer's general theme. He wants to know about the relations between religion, commerce, popular culture and nationalism.

Father Shelley and his catholic flock give him one clue but he finds that his subject is more complicated when he leaves the East Coast and heads, in his camper van for New Orleans Salt Lake City, Twin Falls Idaho, Corwin Springs, Montana, and various other places deep in American country and — perhaps—deep in the American psyche.

For a psyche can also be shallow. At Hayden Lake, Idaho, for instance, de Keyzer finds the Church of Jesus Christ Aryan Nation, which is the neo-nazi church of Idaho. It is a dangerous place and de Keyzer seems not to have been able to take any photograph. All we have is his diary entry.

And what one also misses considering this group of people who have incorporated the Holocaust into their theology, is information a journalist would bring home. How many of them are there? Are there such churches nationwide? Are they linked with secular political organizations? If so, which ones? Good photojournalism teaches us so much about the world, but it does so by suggestion, and always one wants more. Not more images, necessarily, but more facts and comment.

I admire de Keyzer's work but its very quality points to inadequacies in the American press, which does not examine national life as thoroughly as it could. Curiously, photojournalism—once the handmaiden or assistant of a factual story— now shows how much other work the press has to do.

Photographers are so often praised for going to remote or inhospitable places that we forget their number of hours on the road. Looking at de Keyzer's diary. I am struck by the miles and the hours he did, the hours and the miles, and how boring it must have been to cover the ground that produced this portfolio.

Like the good photographer he is, de Keyzer suggests that spiritual uplift is not much more exciting than other parts of life that are tedious and repetitious. More important, he suggests that such uplift may be factitious or genuinely felt, and that an observer simply cannot tell the difference. Quietly he underlines the rule of life that says never interfere with another person's religion.

But de Keyzer does not comment on the way that American religions might help the country's propensity to interfere with other people's quiet lives, all over the globe. He cannot. That would make him a war photographer while his camera style is actually a little passive not quite enquiring enough.