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 have one to erroneous conclusions.

While religion in America may often appear and, indeed, sometimes in 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, 85 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 are weakly perceived 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 litigation 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 shrank 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, when 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 evangelist during "Bike Week" at Daytona Beach, Florida
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-
shod and Christian fundamentalism died
out in the early Thirties, and its place has
now been taken by a Bible-centred evan-
gelical conservatism which has, to some
extent, penetrated almost every denomina-
tion 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 Protestant-
ism, are socially conservative but they are
not racist or hate-mongers. You will never
see them marching on Gay Pride Day,
but nor are they generally infected by
vulgar homophobia.
In the past few years, scandals involv-
ing sex or money and ill-conceived forays
into politics have weakened or destroyed
some of the most famous television min-
isters, but the prediction that such develop-
ments would weaken the standing of Chris-
tianity in the national life was wrong.
America remains Christian, and those who
fail to understand that will fail to under-
stand America.

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 to a biker in Daytona
Beach, Florida, during ’Bike Week’

'Goat but', an exhibition of photographs by Carl De
Keijzer, opens at the Photographers’ Gallery, Great
Newport Street, London W1, on 26 June