A flickering flame of faith in the U.S.S.R.

Whatever else one may say about the religious situation in the Soviet Union, one can certainly assert that there is as much conflicting testimony about it today as there has ever been.

On the one hand, freedom of conscience is guaranteed in the Soviet constitution; on the other hand there are Christians, Jews, Moslems, and Hare Krishna in prisons and labor camps. Russian Churches are the preserve of a dwindling band of drab old babushkas, or so we are told, yet others talk of renewal, renaissance, even revival.

Where does the truth lie? Can all these things be true at once? Is the candle of faith about to be extinguished? Or does it shine with a brighter light than ever before?

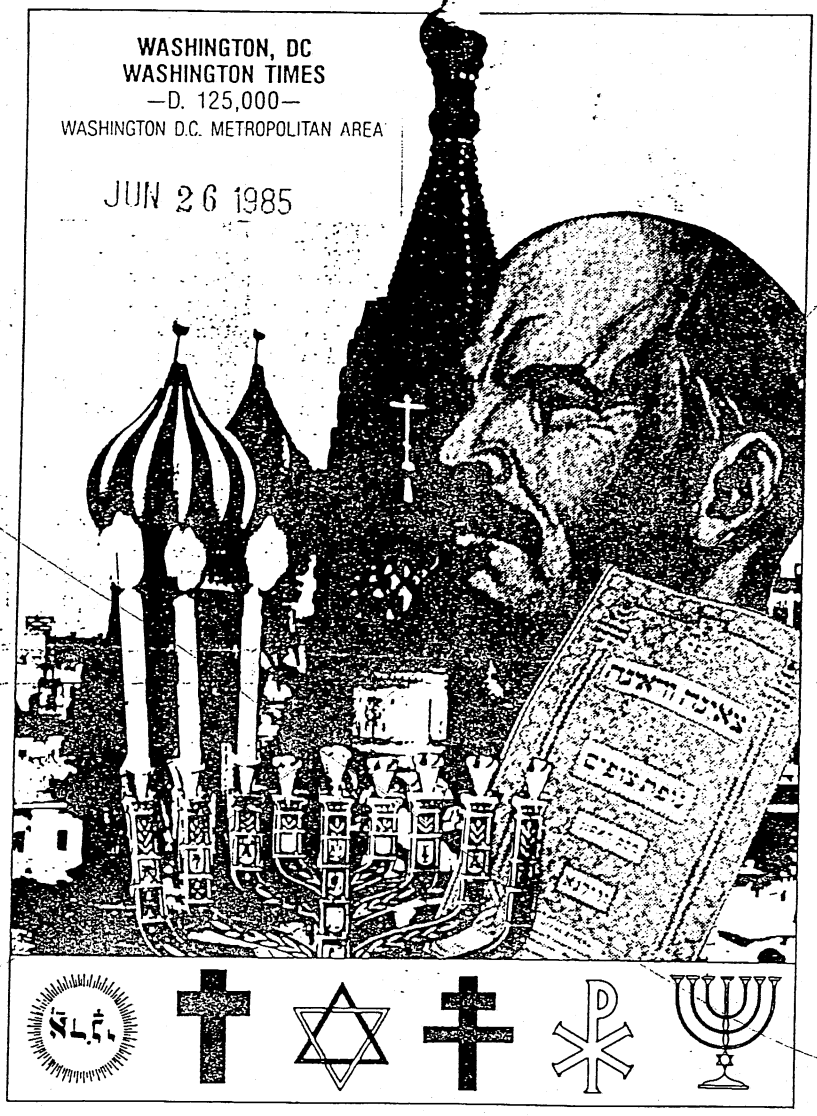
"Candle in the Wind," a documentary film by Pacem Partnership, takes a serious look at these questions. It does not necessarily come up with all the answers, but that is not a failing; rather it is a reflection of the commendable honesty of producer Eugene Shirley. A genuinely open and questioning mind will not come up with cut-and-dried, black-and-white answers to some fundamental problems concerning our understanding of the religious situation under the Soviet regime.

Why are Communists so hostile to religion? "Candle in the Wind" introduces us to the world in which Marx and Engels lived, which formed the background to Marx's famous formula: "Religion is the opium of the people." Then we are swept on to the immense inequalities of Tsarist Russia which did so much to mold Lenin's attitudes. To many, the Russian Orthodox Church seemed to stand firmly on the side of the privileged. It was implacably hostile to the Bolsheviks, even before the Red Terror was unleashed upon it.

But with totally new generations leading both church and state, why should this hostility persist? Perhaps exiled Orthodox writer Anatoli Levitin gives us a clue when he states in the film that the Communists "are bankrupt." While in the early years they were able to inspire and mobilize the youth, today the Soviet Communists have no revolutionary zeal themselves. Instead the visionaries look to religion. In what Communists openly admit is an ideological battle, it is not surprising that they should react in a hostile way when they do not seem to be winning.

The broad sweep of "Candle in the Wind" manages to avoid superficiality. Each of its six segments says something important. Its approach to Jews and Moslems is as sensitive as its treatment of the Christian Church, and those segments have been applauded by the Jewish and Moslem communities. The film has also been welcomed by a wide spectrum of Christian opinion, an amazing feat for a survey of a subject as controversial as the religious situation in the Soviet Union.

"Candle in the Wind" is a unique contribution to understanding religious faith in the U.S.S.R. It sets in a meaningful context those individual events which are reported in our media; it provides a framework in which seemingly contradictory facts are made comprehensible. We see how implacable hostility to all expressions of religious faith and the Communist aim of eliminating all forms of religion from society, have been tempered by a pragmatism that is willing to exploit religious feeling for its own ends, whether for the purpose of rallying the nation against the enemy, as in World War II, or to promote the image of the U.S.S.R. as a free and peace-loving country. There is a constant tension between the desired withering away of religion and the reality of tens of millions of believing citizens — far more than the combined memberships of the Communist Party and the Communist youth league — without whose passive cooperation the country would come to a standstill.



We should not therefore be surprised that the restoration of the Danilovsky Monastery in Moscow, returned to the Orthodox Church two years ago, can take place simultaneously with the attempts by the Soviet authorities to crush out of existence the Pentecostal Church in Chuguyevka, whose 70 adult members, exhausted by constant persecution for their beliefs, have undertaken four hunger strikes in their campaign to be allowed to emigrate. Neither the one nor the other is typical of the religious scene in the U.S.S.R. — and it would be very wrong to imply otherwise. Yet both are pieces within the total picture.

"Candle in the Wind" shows that the reopening of the Danilovsky Monastery cannot be written off as a mere propaganda ploy — though it has undoubtedly been used as one to good effect. Certainly it will be used to impress foreign visitors to religious peace gatherings when its conference facilities are completed. Certainly it was not the church's first choice for a new center in Moscow. But it will nevertheless strengthen the presence of the Orthodox Church in the Soviet capital — it will not be just a showpiece.

Equally, we cannot write off the Pentecostals of Chuguyevka as fanatics who would probably come into conflict with any society, as some might be tempted to see them. The fact that the Soviet authorities can with apparent impunity sentence in the course of one month 10 members of this small religious community to periods of imprisonment ranging from three to five years and can now be bringing charges against five more of the congregation is eloquent witness to their underlying hostility to religion. This hostility expresses itself in many different ways, but it feels it has a free rein when the victims, an isolated minority, carry no weight in Soviet society and have no great influence on world opinion.

And yet, the flame of faith burns on. "Candle in the Wind" affirms, even though the winds are harsh and cold. If, as retired Archbishop of Canterbury Lord Coggan reminds us, the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church, then we should expect faith to flourish in the Soviet Union. Religion is a force to be reckoned with in the U.S.S.R., and that simple fact is vital to our understanding of the Soviet Union, and is reason enough for this film to receive the widest possible showing.

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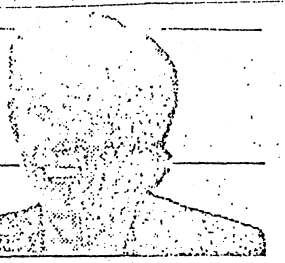

It's not easy annoying folks in airports

On Sunday I decided to go one-on-one with a Hare Krishna.

Reporters are good at pestering people, but Krishnas, well, they're pros. I knew things might get a little rough.

The guy stood by a pillar across from the Pan Am counter at Miami International. He wore a dark blue vest, a blue tie, dark trousers. His name tag said Anthony Clark and he was holding a glossy book that looked about 900 pages thick.

Anthony stuck out his hand; I shook it. He held out the book; I reached for it. No go. A jackhammer wouldn't have separated Anthony from his book. He started his pitch — "Do you know what God looks like?" — but I interrupted.

I asked about the book; how much did it cost?

"We don't sell these books," Anthony declared, but there was a small matter of a donation.

I said, "But if I were a poor person with no money and I wanted this book, just to read, would you give it to me?"

Anthony shook his head.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because it is not a cheap thing," he replied, semi-mystically.

He showed me a picture of Krishna on the book jacket, and I agreed that Krishna looked like a pretty nice deity. Then, before Anthony could get rolling again, I told him I was a reporter.

He took a step or two backwards and asked for some identification. He eyed my notebook as if it were a cobra.

"Don't you ever feel like you're really bothering these people?" I asked, motioning toward the travelers streaming by.

"These people are bothered anyway," Anthony explained. "They're all ready to go home and beat the dog. They're flipping me the bird and they don't even know who I am."

I asked what was the worst thing that ever happened to him while recruiting for Krishna.

"This airport's pretty mellow," he said. "Now Atlanta airport! In Atlanta, one guy started to grab me, choke me, kick me ..." Anthony put a hand around his neck to demonstrate. "The other guy I was with got his finger broken!"

Anthony said he is 26, a one-time engineering student who became a Krishna "devotee" in 1979. Now he spends six days a week soliciting money at the airport.

I asked him why the Krishnas don't sing and beat tambourines and wear peach-colored robes, the way they used to. In the old days you could hear them a mile away and alter your course accordingly. Now they wear wigs and civvies, and travel solo, so they're almost impossible to avoid.

"They complained," Anthony said, bitterly. They, meaning the public. "So OK, now we dress in regular clothes and they say, 'Why aren't your wearing those robes?' "

I was starting to feel sorry for him. I told him it looked like a tough job, annoying people. Anthony said:

"If you very carefully analyze these people, each and every one, something is wrong with all of them. Something is *very seriously* wrong with all of them. You know who Moms Mabley is? She used to tell a joke that something is wrong with everybody, and if nothing's wrong with you, something's *really* wrong with you ... and she was right!"

I had to hand it to Anthony. One thing I didn't expect was a Krishna quoting Moms Mabley.

"Don't you ever get tired of all the rejection?" I asked. Step off a flight from Newark and the last thing you want to see is some guy with a 900-page mantra jump out from behind a pillar.

Anthony said, "You've got to talk to these people. We can't let them go to hell."

He was trying to be patient, but deep down he wished I would go away. To be nice, I gave him 43 cents for a thin paperback written by a person named Hridayananda Dasa Goswami Acaryadeva, which (I'm pretty sure) is not a pseudonym for Stephen King.

Anthony said the money was to buy food, and I told him to have a good day. He said: "I was very wary when you first walked up to me. I get a lot of people ... they're quacks, they're weirdos, they're jerks."

"I believe it," I said. It's a jungle out there.