1985

"Candle in the Wind" - Film review

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FILM REVIEW


This is a first rate one-hour film on the status of religion in the Soviet Union, which could also have been aptly titled with a by-line from the film: Positioned between Commissar and God. The film is a fine combination of both legally and secretly made on location footage in the Soviet Union, interspersed with concise commentary by Soviet religious leaders, (e.g. Metropolitan Filaret), Soviet officials, dissenters living both in the Soviet Union and abroad, (e.g. Anatoliy Levitin), and scholars and religious leaders such as Bruce Rigdon, Trevor Beeson, Leonard Shappiro, and Archbishop Coggan.

Very artful footage filmed during revolutionary times, civil and second world war, and contemporary aspects of both religious and secular life are combined for a smooth, yet dramatic presentation of the story of religion in the Soviet Union. Both its repression and martyrdom and its survival and tenacity due to collaboration with the government as well as heroic sacrifice by those unwilling to be absorbed are presented.

The film is divided into six parts. Part I: "The New God" presents the survival of religious patterns in the new secular form, such as the veneration of Lenin's body, and substitute rites of passage.

Part II: "The State Giveth and the State Taketh Away," deals with the long tragic history of cooperation between the church and the state and the tremendous destruction of the church under Stalin (consider for instance Levitin's claim that in Leningrad from 1500 priests only twelve survived Stalin's purges!) It is also pointed out that an amazing
revival of church life took place during WW II and the post-war period. Yet different forms of the attempts were made to strangle the church under Khruschev, Brezhnev, and followers without resorting to Stalin's methods. A very apt comment characterizes the position of the Orthodox Church, made by Archbishop Coggan: "The Orthodox Church is walking on a razor's edge."

Part III: "He is Risen" deals with the great risks taken both by church leaders and lay people in practicing their religion, the attempts by the state to manipulate the church and the degree to which it has been successful in this. Trevor Beeson thoughtfully remarks that there is "valor in compromise" pointing out that the activities of the church, for instance in peace work, extends beyond mere government manipulation.

Part IV: "If I forget thee, oh Jerusalem" tells the story of the extinction of the Jewish life style which has been created over the centuries, and the tremendous pressure, notwithstanding official disclaimers, on Jews who either wish to practice (there are only seven rabbis left in the USSR), and those who wish to emigrate, including the suffering of those continually denied such emigration. The film clearly points out the primitive anti-Semitism of Soviet public life.

Part V: "There is no God but Allah, and Muhammed is His Prophet" points out the cautious Soviet policy toward its Muslims, who number 47 million and who will, by the end of the century, comprise one-third of the population. The lay character of Islam makes it possible to practice the religion under any circumstances and it is deeply ingrained in the culture. Beside the "official" Islam, upon which Soviet authorities are able to place pressure, there is a "parallel," secret Islam, mostly practiced in Sufi mystic brotherhoods, which is profoundly anti-Soviet
and anti-atheist.

Part VI: "Candle in the Wind" briefly and lyrically captures the persistence and tentativeness of religious life by showing secret baptisms, circumcisions, Hebrew lessons, evangelisms, dissident religious publications, and so forth, together with crowds of worshippers thronging the not so many official places of worship. The conclusion forced upon the viewer is that despite the pressures, the religious longing of the Soviet people is likely to prevail.

The film has few weaknesses. Some attention should have been given to the situation in the Baltic states, especially the well-known resistance of the Lithuanian Catholics. The position of the Ukrainian Uniates, likewise, is all but omitted. Hence the Catholic minority and to a lesser degree the even smaller Evangelical-Baptist did not receive their due. Nevertheless this omission does not distract from the overall impact of the film and this reviewer enthusiastically recommends it to viewing of any confessional or educational audience. Since it is one hour long it would be particularly effective in classroom and in churches, as well as for home video viewing.

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