

SOME KIND OF LIBERATING EFFECT – RELIGION IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE TODAY

A film directed by Valerio Severino, screened at Károli University
of the Reformed Church April 4, 2024, Budapest

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The screening of the above-named documentary took place at Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary as part of the Károli Community Days (“Training Week”), followed by a discussion between Miklós Vassányi (Faculty of Humanities, Károli University) and the film director, Valerio Severino, and was moderated by Judit Mudriczki (Faculty of Humanities, Károli University).

“Do we have the freedom to delve into the study of religion today?” This query forms the basis of Valerio Severino’s documentary, titled *Some Kind of Liberating Effect*. The film presents a tapestry of life lessons woven with the backdrop of academic history and the varied political environments of Central and Eastern Europe. This cinematic journey unfolds thirty years after the era of the so-called Scientific Atheism and clandestine religious practices, offering insightful portraits of scholars of religion that reflect both individual experiences and societal shifts in post-communist countries.

This documentary explores the theme of academic freedom within the realm of religious studies and embarks on a journey through the varied political environments of Central and Eastern Europe. The film captures insights from scholars hailing from Hungary – Mihály Hoppál, András Máté-Tóth, László Gergely Rosta, Tamás Nyirkos –, Czechia, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Romania, and Ukraine. Spanning across twelve cities and three generations, it presents a mosaic of perspectives. Through a series of interviews, the voices of twenty scholars intertwine and coalesce, crafting a narrative tapestry.

Valerio Severino, a scholar of religion, who obtained his PhD at the University of Rome La Sapienza and achieved his Habilitation in Italy has collaborated on research endeavors with esteemed institutions such as the Italian Lincean Academy, as well as the Hungarian and Polish Academies of Sciences, alongside his role as a Marie Curie Fellow at the University UPOL in Olomouc, Czech Republic. Notably, Severino is recognized for his authorship of *Documenting the History of Religions in the Hungarian Academy of Sciences (1950–1970). Letters, Reports, and Requests*

across the Iron Curtain (Brill 2021), wherein he investigates the intricate dynamics of religious scholarship during the mid-20th century. His scholarly pursuits primarily revolve around the 1956 Hungarian revolution and the Cold War history of the academic study of religions.

Furthermore, Severino has ventured into the realm of filmmaking with his feature directorial debut, *Some Kind of Liberating Effect*, which garnered sponsorship from the European Commission, marking a multidisciplinary exploration of his intellectual undertakings beyond traditional academic domains.

The 54-minute film, as mentioned earlier, focuses on the freedom of scientific investigation of religion. It is divided into two parts – one focusing on the period before the regime change, and the other considering contemporary events – all encompassed within a frame story rich with fairy-tale metaphors. In the first part, attention is drawn to the anti-religious policies and state-sponsored atheism, narrated through the personal experiences of researchers and university professors closely associated with religious studies, thereby substantiating what we know about the relationship of this regime with religion.

The second part of the film focuses on current situations, further probing whether there is freedom in academic research. Reflecting on recent political events such as the Russian-Ukrainian war, Hungarian decisions and laws concerning science, or women's opportunities and equality within academia, the discussion explores topics related to these.

Following the screening of the film, the questions and answers session also centered more on present-day issues. The director of the film recounted the challenges encountered during filming, prompting the audience to reflect on these issues and pose questions accordingly. The documentary is now available with Hungarian subtitles on the “Freedom to Study Religion” YouTube channel. The subtitles were created by Éva Ágoston, Anna Papp, Anett Pataki, Henriett Szilágyi, and Laura Torma, as part of an academic activity organized by Judit Mudriczki at Károli University of the Reformed Church.