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Religio. 2024, vol. 32, iss. 1, pp. 187-196

ISSN 1210-3640 (print); ISSN 2336-4475 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.5817/Rel2024-37976>

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.79948>

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Access Date: 29. 11. 2024

Version: 20240606

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*Behind the Scenes of Some Kind of Liberating Effect, a Documentary about Research Freedoms in the Sphere of Religious Studies in Post-Soviet Europe**

VALERIO SEVERINO**

In September 2023, the documentary *Some Kind of Liberating Effect*, about research freedoms in the field of religious studies, was released.¹ The documentary takes a journey through the diverse political landscapes of central and eastern Europe, capturing the perspectives of scholars from Hungary, Czechia, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Romania, and Ukraine, across twelve cities and three generations. Their perspectives interweave and converge in a series of interviews, forming a tapestry of narratives woven together by 20 voices to revisit the question: “Are we free to study religion?”

The documentary features scholars born in the Soviet Union and former Warsaw Pact countries, who went through the political transition. They bear witness to the democratic transformation that occurred in the wake of 1989-1991, and the shift from decades of Scientific Atheism and State Atheism. The documentary captures their personal and professional experiences, as they grappled with the complexities of re-evaluating the openness of science to religion in a reunited Europe, and examines the tensions that they see as undermining the ideal of freedom that emerged from the fall of Communism. In addition, the film investigates new restrictions on academic freedom and new recollections of the past. An array of scholars

* This extended report has been peer-reviewed.

** The text was prepared as a result of a Marie Curie Fellowship, Department of Sociology, Andragogy and Cultural Anthropology, Palacký University Olomouc.

1 In keeping with the Open Access ethos and policy of the MSCA program, the film, a Key Exploitable Result of a project funded by this scholarship CROSS (Communication-for-ReligiOus-StudieS project), has been made freely available on *YouTube*; see “Freedom to Study Religion” [online], *YouTube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A6IRpf_pBaY>, [19. 1. 2024]. This channel serves as a platform for disseminating the film and other related videos, expanding the collection over time.



Religio: Revue pro religionistiku 32/1, 2024, 187-196.

<https://doi.org/10.5817/Rel2024-37976>

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from various fields, including sociology, ethnology, anthropology, political science, psychology, classic studies, comparative folklore, Asian studies, church history, the history of Christianity, cognitive science, gender studies, and the academic study of religion, were selected to present their expertise. These scholars not only represent their respective countries but also encompass a range of typologies, including leaders, senior or post-PhD researchers, and intellectual emigrants.² Their responses are captured in this documentary which, 30 years after the era of Scientific Atheism and underground churches, reveals a collection of life-lesson portraits intertwining personal stories with the history of science.

Conceived and brought to life between 2021 and 2023, the film's genesis stems from the combined support of the European Commission, which sponsored the documentary as part of a Marie Curie-scholarship program (MSCA) hosted in Czechia by Palacký University, Olomouc;³ and the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR)'s network, a member organization of the International Council for Philosophy and Human Sciences within UNESCO. The interviewees were connected through their participation in the IAHR; its member group, the European Association for the Study of Religion (EASR); and its affiliated group, the International Study of Religion in Eastern and Central Europe Association (ISORECEA).

Background

Some Kind of Liberating Effect delves into the critical issue of research freedom, a cornerstone of the European Commission's agenda for decades.

2 Twenty-two scholars of religions from 15 universities participated, necessitating 15 shoots and the deployment of 13 film crews across 12 cities to accommodate their respective locations and schedules: Budapest, Szeged, Prague, Olomouc, Krakow, Warsaw, Vilnius, Riga, Tartu, Bucharest, Chernivtsi, Tuscaloosa (Alabama, USA). The shoots took place between October 2022 and May 2023. The interviewees were: András Máté-Tóth in an interview filmed in Szeged (Hungary); Milda Ališauskienė and Audrius Beinorius in Vilnius (Lithuania); Gergely Rosta and Tamás Nyirkos in Budapest (Hungary); Liudmyla Fylypovych and Iryna Lazorevych in Chernivtsi (Ukraine) at the Chernivtsi University; Oleg Kyselov in Tuscaloosa (Alabama, USA) at the University of Alabama, Department of Religious Studies; Mihály Hoppál in Budapest (Hungary); Lech Trzcionkowski and Halina Grzymala-Moszczyńska in Krakow (Poland); Anita Stasulane, Jānis Priede and Maija Grizāne in Riga (Latvia); Ülo Valk and Madis Arukask in Tartu (Estonia); Dorota Hall in Warsaw (Poland); Eugen Ciurtin and Bogdan Tătaru-Cazaban in Bucharest (Romania) at the Institute for the History of Religions; Alessandro Testa in Prague (Czechia); Tomáš Bubík and David Václavík in Olomouc (Czechia). The interviews, i.e. the names of the respondents and locations, are listed in chronological order.

3 The project CROSS was funded by the European Commission's Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions program, Horizon 2020, Grant agreement ID: 101032467.

In 2000, the European Union enshrined this principle in its *Charter of Fundamental Rights*, declaring that “the arts and scientific research shall be free of constraint”.⁴ Building upon this foundation, the European Commission adopted the *European Charter for Researchers* in 2005, establishing research freedom as its primary principle. This charter emphasizes the fundamental right of researchers to pursue their inquiries without undue interference, while upholding ethical principles and practices.⁵ To date, over 1,400 organizations across Europe have endorsed the charter. In 2020, the Ministerial Conference on the European Research Area reaffirmed Europe’s commitment to research freedom with the *Bonn Declaration*. This declaration not only recognizes Europe’s role as a “guardian of freedom” but also sets forth specific actions to protect and promote research freedom. It calls for measures to “suppress the distortion of facts and disinformation” and emphasizes the importance of restoring “trust in science” as a “key for an inclusive, open, and democratic society”.⁶

The film subscribes to these EU ambitions. At the same time, it is inspired by the discussions of the IAHR on the intellectual freedom of the study of religion from ideologies, notably upon the fall of Communism. One of its first ground-breaking activities dates back to 1999 when a special IAHR conference hosted in Brno (Czechia) delved into the impact of the Cold War. This event, titled *The Academic Study of Religion during the Cold War*, brought together 23 specialists, scholars from formerly Communist countries, as well as, among others, members of the North American Association,⁷ highlighting its significance in the field. In 2008, the reference book *Religious Studies. A Global View*, edited by Gregory D.

4 European Union, “Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union”, *Official Journal of the European Communities* 43/364, 2000, 1-23: 12 (The Charter came into force in 2009).

5 European Commission, “Commission Recommendation of 11 March 2005 on the European Charter for Researchers and on a Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers”, *Official Journal of the European Union* 75/251, 2005, 67-77: 70 (*General Principles and Requirements Applicable to Researchers* [Annex. Section I]).

6 European Research Area (ERA), “Bonn Declaration on Freedom of Scientific Research” [online], <https://www.college-de-france.fr/media/programme-pause/UPL6426313245027255266_Bonn_declaration2020.pdf>, [25. 6. 2023].

7 Iva Doležalová – Luther H. Martin – Dalibor Papoušek (eds.), *The Academic Study of Religion during the Cold War: East and West*, New York (NY): Peter Lang 2001. Contributors are Kurt Rudolph, Charles Marie Ternes, Gary Lease, Michał Buchowski, Weigang Chen, Břetislav Horyna, Josef Kandert, Ján Komorovský, Milan Kováč, Dalibor Papoušek, Halina Grzymała-Moszczyńska, Dmitriy Mikulskiy, Linnart Mäll, Luboš Bělka, Jan Bouzek, Karel Werner, Luther H. Martin, Gustavo Benavides, Willem Hofstee, William E. Paden, Donald Wiebe, Jacques Waardenburg and Michael Pye.

Alles, dedicated a chapter to the eastern European region, further recognizing the importance of this area of study and its inputs.⁸ In 2015, the editorial series of the IAHR published *Studying Religions with the Iron Curtain Closed and Opened*, featuring contributions from 11 specialists representing eight countries in CEE.⁹

The review-debate stretched over several years.¹⁰ In 2018, the conference of the ISORECEA affiliated to the IAHR, *Un(b)locking Religion. Studying Religion in Today's Central and Eastern Europe*, hosted in Hungary a panel at the University of Szeged titled *Religious Studies Un(b)locking* with the participation of seven specialists from five CEE countries.¹¹ In 2019, the panel *Re-unifying Europe* was arranged for the conference of the EASR and IAHR Regional Conference at the University of Tartu (Estonia), attended by experts from eight CEE countries, who all related the history of how their national groups gained the freedom to join the CIPSH/UNESCO organization.¹² This ongoing academic dialogue has

8 Eugen Ciurtin, "Eastern Europe", in: Gregory D. Alles (ed.), *Religious Studies: A Global View*, London – New York (NY): Routledge 2008, 50-74.

9 Tomáš Bubík – Henryk Hoffmann (eds.), *Studying Religions with the Iron Curtain Closed and Opened. The Academic Study of Religion in Eastern Europe*, Leiden: Brill 2015. Contributors are Tomáš Bubík, David Václavík, Henryk Hoffmann, András Máté-Tóth, Csaba Máté Sarnyai, Ülo Valk, Tarmo Kulmar, Jānis Priede, Liudmyla O. Fylypovych, Jurij O. Babinov and Ekaterina Elbakyan.

10 Reviews of L. H. Martin – D. Papoušek – I. Doležalová (eds.), *The academic study...* were published by David Václavík [Review], *Religio: revue pro religionistiku* 9/2, 2001: 226-229; Russell T. McCutcheon [Review], *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 70/3, 2002: 633-636; Simona Merlo [Review], *Cristianesimo nella storia* 26/3, 2005, 854-856; Steven Engler [Review], *Religious Studies Review* 32/1 and 32/2, 2006: 25 and 102-103. Reviews of T. Bubík – H. Hoffmann (eds.), *Studying Religions ...* were published by Donald Wiebe [Review], *Temenos. Nordic Journal of Comparative Religion* 52/2, 2016, 333-335; Branko Sekulić [Review], *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 36/3, 2016, 60-63; Marta Kołodziejka [Review], *Religion* 47/2, 2017, 293-295; Valerio Severino, "Behind and across the Iron Curtain: Reflections Following the Discussion in Method and Theory in the Study of Religion on T. Bubík's and H. Hoffmann's *The Academic Study of Religion in Eastern Europe*", *Studi e Materiali di Storia delle Religioni* 84/1, 2018, 345-349; Gregory D. Alles [Review], *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 30/2, 2018, 185-190; Barbara Krawcowicz, "Religious Studies, Theology and the Sociopolitical", *MTSR* 30/2, 2018, 173-177; Stefan Ragaz, "Reading Scientific Atheism Against the Grain: The Soviet Study of Religion as a Methodological Challenge", *MTSR* 30/2, 2018, 178-184; and the reply wrote by Tomáš Bubík, "Is the Study of Religions in the Eastern Europe Still behind the Iron Curtain? Response to Gregory Alles, Barbara Krawcowicz and Stefan Ragaz", *MTSR* 30/2, 2018, 191-200.

11 Contributors are Anna Mariya Basauri Ziuzina, Oleg Kyselov, Elena Stepanova, Lech Trzcionkowski, Tomáš Bubík, Aleš Prázný and Valerio Severino.

12 Contributors are Valerio Severino, Henryk Hoffmann, Piotr Stawiński, Tomáš Bubík, Marianna Shakhnovich, Eugen Ciurtin, Ergo-Hart Västriik, Janis Priede, Milda Ališauskienė and Rasa Pranskevičiūtė-Amoson.

resonated across Europe, extending its influence to other countries such as Italy, Germany, and also across the Atlantic to North America.

Amidst a fervent ongoing debate, the film aims to further explore the objective of Religious Studies in CEE through a cinematic exploration – one that seeks to engage a broader audience and foster a more inclusive debate that might fuel academic endeavours.

Ethical issues

To ensure the ethical compliance of the film project, an informed consent process was implemented for all interviewees. For the sake of fairness, all the participants received the same set of ten questions.¹³ The opportunity to decline to answer any question or suggest new questions or modifications further emphasized the participants' control over their engagement in the project. With one exception,¹⁴ no additional questions were proposed by the interviewees. In addition, to further minimize the potential influence of, and/or interference from the interviewer, the interviews were conducted in a single stand-alone form.

The project initially envisioned personal storytelling as a more engaging 'life lesson' approach to exploring the concept of "freedom of thought and expression" than traditional academic lectures. By drawing upon personal narratives, even those not directly related to scientific research, the project aimed to foster connections with the general audience, enabling

13 The interviewees responded to the following questions: 1. *What led you to become a scholar interested in religion? Please, refer to the very first thing that sparked your interest.* 2. *What is your ideal of freedom of research? And/or what does it mean to you?* 3. *What do you consider the most impactful events (1 to 3) that have either promoted or hindered freedom in your country? Please, recall some personal memories, if any, related to these events.* 4. *Has the freedom of research undergone any changes in the last 50 years?* 5. *From what has the Academic Study of Religion to be free in order to be scientific?* 6. *Could you give your personal position on the claim "the freedom from theology represents the immediate goal of the academic study of religion"?* 7. *A scientific approach may reach results or knowledge which are different from the dogma of a religion. What is your view concerning a confrontation, if any, between freedom of religion and the freedom of academic studies?* 8. *Can you think of any circumstances / cases when eventual conscious or subconscious self-restraint may limit the freedom of research in the academic study of religion?* 9. *Do you believe in the authority of science (facts/data)? What kind of obedience to this authority do you consider acceptable and/or compulsory?* 10. *Please, share direct or indirect experiences, and/or state your views on limits to the access of women to religious knowledge in institutions affiliated and non-affiliated to Churches.*

14 The only additional question, suggested by an interviewee, ran as follows: *Is freedom still an issue for the new generation?*

them to relate to the subject matter on a personal level.¹⁵ The project format was then modified to comply with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and its provisions on sensitive personal data (art. 9). Accordingly, interviewees were not directly queried about their religious or political affiliations but were given the freedom to self-disclose in order to uphold freedom of speech, in compliance with art. 85. Data-processing was implemented for “historical research” (art. 89, 2) in accordance with the data minimization principle (art. 5, 1. c).

Interviewees were granted the right to withdraw any part of the shared content without needing to give a justification. Only in two cases was this right claimed: in the first one, a short passage in which a person was named was withdrawn, for fear of shedding unfavourable light on them, as the political and international circumstances had changed and the example might have been interpreted in a negative way; in the second, the interviewee, thinking back on one of the answers previously given, feared that their words, if taken out of context, might be misinterpreted and hurt their academic reputation.

To uphold ethical standards, the project conscientiously informed interviewees of the potential impacts of their statements on their careers and reputations. Additionally, excerpts from interviews were selected and edited in a way that ensured they would not be misconstrued without the broader context.

Linguistic issues

English served as the official language of the questionnaire, interviews, and documentary to facilitate wider international dissemination and enhance the accessibility of the project. The documentary addressed participants from nine countries, making English the most effective medium for fostering connection. Furthermore, the film project aligns with the international standards of the IAHR, EASR and ISORECEA, which have adopted English as their primary language for conferences and debate.

The right to speak one’s mother tongue would have been granted if any of the subjects had preferred so. In this case, the interview or part of the interview would have been provided with English subtitles. This option was offered so that free expression would not be restricted by linguistic barriers. Only in two cases was there a brief discussion concerning the preferred language, the reason behind which was that language is not only a means of expression, but also a marker of identity.

15 I refer to the original text of the project, paragraph 1.1.3 Scientific Objectives, 1. Sub-Objective.

In some cases, the respondents asked about the possibility of another *lingua franca*, but, in the end, another language was used only in one case.¹⁶

Gender issue

In accordance with the Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 of the European Commission, which was the sponsor of the film, the project aimed at promoting gender balance in the selection of the scholars to be interviewed. However, the outcome shows disparity, as out of the final number of respondents (22), only seven were women.

It should be noted that a higher proportion of women (9) compared to men (4) did not participate, either by declining the invitation, failing to respond, or being unable to attend due to their circumstances. While the stated reasons for not attending were often political in nature, the disparity in participation rates suggests the need for further investigation into potential underlying gender-related factors.

The film sought to adjust the gender imbalance in such a way that the men-women participation rate was not reflected in the proportions of the testimonies included; instead, where possible, the documentary prioritized women's voices in the selection of the footage. The project also sought to tackle the gender dimension through a special topic: "Extent and limits of the access of women to religious knowledge in institutions affiliated and non-affiliated to Churches".

In an effort to promote gender equality, the film aimed to highlight the work of the IAHR-Women Scholars Network (WSN). In this spirit, it was meaningful to include the Lithuanian scholar Milda Ališauskienė, one of the WSN coordinators from central and eastern Europe.

The Russian Issue in the Context of the Invasion of Ukraine

A basic chronology of the events is provided for context. First, it should be noted that the film project was initiated in August 2020, and that the pre-production phase started in October 2021. The first interviews were conducted in November 2022, eight months after the beginning of the Russian aggression against Ukraine. The breakout of the war influenced the selection of the respondents and resulted in the exclusion of Russia

¹⁶ Due to the documentary's entirely English language format, the French-language interview with Bogdan Tătaru-Cazaban, conducted in Bucharest, was not included in the final cut. The interview has been released as a stand-alone video project on the *YouTube* channel "Freedom to Study Religion", launching a web series based on the project's video collection.

from those countries that had been intended to be included in the documentary. A detailed analysis of the factors contributing to this exclusion follows, encompassing the international academic community, the European Commission, and the circumstances of scholars in Russia.

The project in the pre-production phase faced the challenge that the CEE network was disrupted. On various occasions, as a sign of protest, Religious Studies scholars stood for an embargo and, on a professional level, severed ties with Russian colleagues. In doing so, a number of the scholars were responsive to the appeal of the National Research Foundation of Ukraine on behalf of the entire scientific community of Ukraine, which stated that “immediate severance of all your ties with Russian scientific structures, which are in the service of the totalitarian fascist regime, is urgently needed,” and called for a “fight for [...] freedom”.¹⁷

Statements by Russian scholars also circulated, such as the following: “Having unleashed the war, Russia doomed itself to international isolation, to the position of a pariah country. This means that we, scientists, will no longer be able to do our job normally: after all, conducting scientific research is unthinkable without full cooperation with colleagues from other countries. The isolation of Russia from the world means further cultural and technological degradation of our country in the complete absence of positive prospects. War with Ukraine is a step to nowhere”.¹⁸

In a statement released on social media, the IAHR Executive Committee recommended that all member associations “terminate all cooperation with academic institutions and scholarly associations working in the study of religions area that have links to the Russian state or receive any form of Russian state funding or recognition”. However, the committee also urged that Russian scholars be allowed “to participate in the international and regional scientific events linked with IAHR”, provided they do so as “independent scholars not representing any Russian state research and/or study institution”.¹⁹

17 National Research Foundation of Ukraine, “Appeal to Researchers across the World [2022-02-28 Nr. 003S-169]” [online], <<https://nrfu.org.ua/en/news-en/appeal-to-researchers-across-the-world/>>, [18. 6. 2022].

18 “An Open Letter from Russian Scientists and Science Journalists against the War with Ukraine [published on February 24, 2022]” [online], <<https://www.eureporter.co/world/russia/2022/02/24/an-open-letter-from-russian-scientists-and-science-journalists-against-the-war-with-ukraine/?fbclid=IwAR22LUXczTz-VJpU4Pqz05SupDR0EFLQz2AsvnTKNJWQrLmGrbdeWqgYbhA>>, [6. 6. 2023].

19 International Association for the History of Religions – Executive Committee, “Statement concerning Russian War against Ukraine [1. 3. 2022]” published for instance on the website of the Lithuanian member group [online], <<https://religijotyra.lt/en/international-association-for-the-history-of-religions-executive-committee-statement-concerning-russian-war-against-ukraine/>>, [20. 6. 2023]; and the document “Appendix VI: IAHR Executive Committee Statement concerning Russian War

The statement provoked various reactions within the Association, with some members expressing strong opposition to its issuance. They highlighted that “bodies like IAHR, CIPSH [...] were established post-WWII, with UNESCO’S direct or indirect influence [...] to link scholars and scientists from both Cold War blocs. This gave rise to the academic independence of these international associations from political sway. Excluding Russian scholars and institutions” – they argue – “goes against this core principle”. Moreover, they criticized the decision of the IAHR to make a political statement, which they considered unprecedented and therefore unconstitutional.²⁰

On March 2, the EASR Executive Committee released an official statement expressing its “support” for Ukrainian colleagues, particularly with regard to the upcoming EASR Annual Conference scheduled for 2023 under the auspices of the Ukrainian Association of Researchers of Religion (UARR). However, due to the escalating conflict in Ukraine, the UARR was compelled to relinquish its hosting duties midway through the conference preparations.²¹

On another level, all projects funded by the European Commission were affected by the sanctions taken by the European Union: The Commission was asked to terminate payments to Russian public bodies or related organizations, as well as to refrain from sending any funds to Russia.²² This meant that it would have been impossible to hire a film crew or secure a shooting location within Russia’s borders. Moreover, the tense political climate made it challenging to travel to Russia to conduct in-person interviews with Russian scholars.

Some Russian scholars were ready to be interviewed and included in the documentary even after the outbreak of war. However, they expressed doubts concerning the making of concrete plans, as they perceived the circumstances to be unpredictable. In some cases, scholars were unwilling

against Ukraine” [online], <https://www.iahrweb.org/bulletins/IAHR_e-Bull_Suppl_Nov_2023.pdf/>, [7. 2. 2024].

- 20 “Appendix VII: Secretary General’s Report on the Process Leading up to the Issuance and the Executive Committee’s Reflections”, *IAHR e-Bulletin Supplement Tokyo Edition November 2023*, 5-6 [online], <https://www.iahrweb.org/bulletins/IAHR_e-Bull_Suppl_Nov_2023.pdf/>, [18. 1. 2024] with reference to the EC discussion on June 26 during the annual meeting in Cork (Ireland), following the official protest on March 2 filed by eight honorary life members of the IAHR.
- 21 EASR, “Statement Concerning War against Ukraine” and “EASR Conference 2023 in Vilnius” [online], <<https://www.easr.eu/2022/09/01/next-easr-conference-in-vilnius/>>, [22. 6. 2023].
- 22 European Commission, “Statement by Commissioner Mariya Gabriel on the Termination of Cooperation with Russian Public Entities in Research and in Education” [online], <https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/STATEMENT_22_2391>, [6. 10. 2023].



to participate, as they felt it would place them in a vulnerable situation. To address these concerns, the idea of including anonymous testimonies was explored, but it was ultimately deemed impractical without robust security measures to protect the identities of the respondents.

The Russian invasion also rendered it challenging to film interviews in Ukraine. The filming of an interview with scholars in the Bukovyna Metropolis, for which an operator was available on October 10, 2022, had to be postponed due to heavy bombing and was eventually conducted on October 29 at Chernivtsi National University. Thanks to the University of Alabama, an interview with a Ukrainian émigré scholar, who received the support of the Department of Religious Studies, could be recorded in Tuscaloosa.