

---

## About a Boy Club Movement, Implicit Religion and a Local Czech and Slovak Transmedia Phenomenon (review)

Zuzana Kostičová

A Czech Religious studies scholar and Protestant theologian Pavel Hošek has been becoming more and more focused on implicit religious phenomena and their presence in literature and popular culture in the last few years. After years of analyzing C. S. Lewis' and J. R. R. Tolkien's texts and their religious implications, Hošek suddenly turned his attention to Czech young adult literature and to Jaroslav Foglar, its most celebrated author. The result of this new interest is a little book called *Evangelium podle Jaroslava Foglara* ("Gospel According to Jaroslav Foglar").

While Jaroslav Foglar is not widely known outside of the Czech Republic and Slovakia, he is literally the most famous and most influential Czech author of young adult literature. As a young man, Foglar got acquainted with the Scouts movement (also the Wandervogel movement and the Czech organization Junák, similar to the Scouts). Although he was already too mature to engage in the movement in the role of a child, he became active as a leader and literally spent his entire life dedicating himself to educating boys. Even though he was greatly loved and respected both as a Scouts leader and a journalist working for children's magazines (also as a writer of a long comic book series, on which he cooperated with two illustrators, Jan Fischer and Marko Čermák), his by far most important contribution to the Czech culture lay in his novels. Mostly intended for boys of the age around thirteen, the books speak not only about nature and adventure, but also noble friendship, cultivation of character, perseverance and high moral values that every boy should strive to attain. Many of his critics pointed out that Foglar's books are filled with outright moralizing. Nevertheless, the popularity of the novels among children clearly shows that Foglar was uniquely gifted not only to create a magical atmosphere of dark, old cities filled with mystery and breathtakingly beautiful wild landscape, but also to present morality and nobleness of character to children in such a way that not only they devoured his books, but actively tried to bring what they read to life.

This is precisely Pavel Hošek's launching point. The imaginative mystique and moral dimension of the books create a world in itself, closely intertwined with actual practices of the Scouts and Junáks; literally thousands of boys were deeply influenced by them. Hošek presents Foglar's world as a unique and specifically Czech type of implicit religion for boys (and, although they perhaps were not Foglar's main target group, also girls). Inspired by Ninian Smart's famous *Dimensions of the sacred*, Hošek proceeds to analyze the phenomenon of "Foglaring" as a coherent worldview, functionally equivalent to religion. He analyzes the rites of passage, especially the initia-

tions that took place in his Junák troop and that are backed up by narratives that can be found in Foglar's novels and comic books. For example, the "thirteen beavers", an equivalent of the Scouts' badges, are based on a story of a Wild West boy Roy told in Foglar's *Hoši od Bobří řeky* (*Beaver River Boys*) novel. Importantly, these initiations are not only a kind of "award", but should lead to a deep personal transformation not wholly unlike to a religious one. In this sense, Hošek shows that the initiation process is strongly related both to landscape (whether it's a dark city or wilderness of a breathtaking beauty) and to encounter with death.

In this sense, these rites and narratives are strongly intertwined with actual experiences that the boys live through both in the troop and in the club life. This is another important dimension of Foglaring – were it confined only to the official troop led by Foglar, it would have been a very short-lived phenomenon. Instead, the author, inspired by the Wandervogel movement, created a concept of a boy club, a group of friends led by the oldest and most responsible of the children (i.e. not created by an adult, but by the children themselves). Foglar actively supported the actual creation of these clubs on the pages of the boys' magazines he wrote for. Moreover, the protagonists of many of his novels were members of such clubs; the most important case of course being the five boys from the Rychlé šípy (Fast Arrows) club featured in Foglar's most famous novel *Záhada hlavolamu* (*The Puzzle Mystery*) and its two sequels. Even during both Nazi and Communist regime with their strict prohibition of Foglar's work, these children clubs continued to appear spontaneously in secret and the novels were discreetly passed from family to family and devoured by hundreds of children. Moreover, even though Foglar's books were intended for boys and in most cases features no female characters, significant or not (notable exceptions being Vlasta from the comic series and the girls from *Historie Svorné sedmy* novel), girls actually actively read his books and some of them spontaneously organized in clubs as well. The club experience was related to a place (klubovna, "clubhouse") and to the club's history, meticulously recorded in a chronicle. Hošek convincingly shows how these phenomena perfectly match Smart's institutional dimension of the sacred and how even the material dimension gets its say in the form of visual signs of club membership (most famously depicted as the yellow pins in *Záhada hlavolamu*) and "sacred" objects of the club (from club flag and souvenirs and club trips and camps to the most sacred of all, the club chronicle).

The club or troop environment, the specific initiations devised by Foglar, the deeply moving experiences created both by the reading of the novels and the actual trips to dark city alleys or stunning countryside, all of this was devised to incite a profound transformation of the character. Average, boring, and meaningless life of wandering through city streets with no aim or goal is left aside and a new life emerges; a life of noble deeds, intense, often almost mystical experiences, and a high moral code. This "new, better life" (or "blue life", as put in the *Rychlé šípy* comic series) is often personified by a concrete protagonist of the novels described as noble or "knightly", such as Mirek Dušín or Vláda Dratuš in *Rychlé šípy* novels or Ludva Grygar in *Chata v Jezerní kotlině* (*The Lake Hollow Hut*). These exceptional boys then serve as role models for their friends and an embodiment of the ideal boy of Foglar's books.

This type of approach to Foglar's books is complemented by two chapters; one dedicated to a comparison with Tolkien's fairytale stories theory and one that analyzes Foglar in the light of C. S. Lewis' idea of lifechanging effects of reading. Despite of the fact that Foglar's imagination is firmly rooted in the real world of here and now and in this sense, it is far from the imaginative worlds of Lewis and Tolkien, the comparisons hold well. Nevertheless, from the perspective of Religious studies, the core of Hošek's book remains the analysis of Foglar's works in the perspective of the *Dimensions of the Sacred*. Hošek reinforces his arguments by showing that at least in one documented case of Radko Kadlec, later Father Bernard, the seeds sown by Foglar bloomed in a full-fledged conversion to Christianity in young adulthood.

In sum, Pavel Hošek's new book becomes a must-read for anyone interested in Czech popular culture and its religious or implicit religious content. In the context of a boom of interest of Religious studies scholars in popular culture and its comic books, pulp journals, videogames and other similar phenomena, it is only too easy to be swept by the current that focuses mainly on the United States and Western Europe, forgetting the specificity of local environment. It is no exaggeration to say that for a Czech or Slovak child, Foglar is just as important as C. S. Lewis or the creators of Batman for a Western one. And this is not only true for the generations that went through their childhood during the Nazi and Communist periods, but increasingly so for the current generations that experienced the boom of publishing of Foglar's books after the Velvet Revolution. Moreover, the nineties with their new reprints of the comic series, relaunching of the old 1969 TV series *Záhada hlavolamu* (which was prohibited by the Communists) and the new 1993 movie transformed Foglar's world into a summarily important Czech transmedial phenomenon, coupled with a new emergence of Foglar-style troops and children's clubs. In this sense, Pavel Hošek's book may be of interest not only to Czech scholars and enthusiasts, but also to a wider international audience studying both implicit religion and religion in the media and popular culture.

Pavel Hošek, *Evangelium podle Jaroslava Foglára*,  
Brno: Centrum pro studium demokracie a kultury 2017, 203 p.

<https://doi.org/10.14712/25704893.2017.11>