

*Rev.*

reviewed by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [October 17, 2012](#) issue



I turned to *Rev.* belatedly, having ignored friends' praise and a British TV audience nearing 2 million. I feared it would reprise the mid-1990s sitcom *The Vicar of Dibley*, which portrayed with saccharine sweetness a woman vicar in a rural parish. Episode one of *Rev.* (available at Hulu.com) set me straight.

The *Rev.* is one Adam Smallbone (played by the wonderfully blinky Tom Hollander), a pastor who responds to lewd gestures from construction workers by carefully taking off his collar, fixing his gaze on the workers and shouting, "Why don't you just fuck off?" This is a pastoral portrait drawn in a post-Christendom world: we see a tow truck drag away a hearse that is parked directly in front of the church—and this happens during a funeral.

The makers of *Rev.* seem to get church life. St. Savior in the Marshes is a struggling city parish willing to try new things, but members get nervous when evangelicals from elsewhere in the diocese pull out pews, hire a DJ, install a smoothie bar and impugn women's ordination:

The newcomers are asked to leave.

The congregation wants to be open to its Muslim neighbors, but wonders if allowing a Muslim prayer meeting in a Christian sanctuary is taking tolerance a bit far. The parish functions under the iron fist of Archdeacon Robert (Simon McBurney), an unctuous bureaucrat who pours out any cup of coffee served to him without tasting

it and leaves a conversation with Smallbone to attend a book launch by Christopher Hitchens. There is no theology of glory at work at St. Savior. It is just a struggling band that wonders if it has a future. A concluding scene in season two shows homeless people and a reactionary conservative guest, along with the parish's seven loyal members, all feasting on Christmas turkey—the kingdom nearly come.

Rev. also gets the life of a pastor. A homeless parishioner named Colin (Steve Evets) calls the vicar “Vicarage,” drinks and does drugs in the cloister, accidentally smashes a stained-glass window with a beer bottle and struggles to find and keep a job. Yet he's there for worship every time the doors open. Smallbone and his wife Alex (Olivia Colman) struggle to maintain an intimate life in a vicarage where the door can open any minute (perhaps explaining Alex's desire to act out a sexual fantasy in public). When Smallbone declares in self-pity that he feels like “a remnant of an illusion of what people used to believe in,” Colin responds pitch-perfectly, “Don't be such a dickhead.”

Smallbone is a rather disreputable character himself. He smokes and drinks with Colin the homeless parishioner, and he has sticky fingers. He steals from the offering plate, from the convenience store and from a distraught and drunk parishioner. In one episode he loses faith in his vocation and stays home eating junk food, watching daytime TV and smoking. When he wants in on a joke at the local pub, he covers his clerical collar with his hand. The bartender insists she can't repeat the joke: “It has the word *clitoris* in it,” she says to the vicar, who just wants to fit in. But Adam is later reminded of the deep dignity of his profession when a policeman drags him against his will to administer last rites to a dying parishioner. Adam is deeply flawed, terribly funny and appallingly self-conscious—like many pastors I know.

The show nails down the petty rivalries between differently gifted pastors.

Smallbone is sent an intern who has published a theology textbook to rave reviews and “has bishop written all over her,” according to the archdeacon. To top it off, she is a piano virtuoso. “What's anagogical mean?” Smallbone asks, reading her work. The parish's pretentious lay reader corrects his pronunciation of the word and then huffs, “She misuses it several times in her book.” Naturally, people start turning out for her preaching in a way they normally don't at St. Savior, so she has to move on.

In another case of surprising church growth, Smallbone realizes that some people are attending worship only to get their children into the parish school. He refuses their bribes, and so they stop coming to church—and there goes the money the

parish desperately needs to repair the stained-glass window ruined by Colin's beer bottle.

The parish enters a soccer league only to be crushed by Catholics, Muslims, evangelicals and everyone else in sight. One member is tying his shoes in goal while the ball sails past. Alex is hungover and flails away haplessly at the ball, while "Onward, Christian Soldiers" plays in the background. Smallbone gives a speech in the huddle that invokes an anti-Catholic sentiment he would otherwise abhor: "Let's do it for our kind, liberal God who loves women and gays and not their vain tasteless demanding god who loves gold and supported the Nazis!" When the Catholic players stop to attend to the upchucking vicar's wife, Smallbone seizes his opportunity and scores an unchallenged goal. It's a perfect tragicomic scene for a church that seems to be getting lapped by its competitors and where the energy that's left is a reprise of an era it is embarrassed about.

Crass and cynical as it is, the show is willing to show some heart. When an atheist teacher is hired at the parish school without Smallbone's knowledge, he's tempted to flex what little authority he has to have the man removed. But then the teacher dies in a bike accident, and the vicar is left to eulogize him in front of distraught schoolchildren. "Matthew didn't believe in heaven, but I do," he says, and illustrates his sermon with a story about waterbugs that become dragonflies. They couldn't return to their old life or to their friends precisely because they were transfigured. For the first time in the show he has the kids' attention and is preaching the gospel at the same time. Maybe such things are possible.