

These Soviet spies understand how serious baptism is

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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[Alyssa Rosenberg makes a smart point about the FX show \*The Americans\*](#), a drama about a married pair of KGB agents working undercover in early-80s metro D.C. Their two teenage children are unaware of what their parents do, and the older one, Paige, becomes a devoted churchgoer. This setup, says Rosenberg, enables the show to depict Christianity

as a seismic force, something capable of producing profound transformation in both individuals and society.... Over the past two seasons, Paige's attraction to Christianity has dovetailed with a more sinister plot: the KGB's request that Philip and Elizabeth recruit their daughter, turning her into a second-generation, American-born spy for the agency. This season we learn that Elizabeth has been accompanying Paige to church, convinced that what's drawing her daughter to faith is the opportunity it offers her to work on issues such as the anti-nuclear movement.... But after Paige asks whether Pastor Tim (Kelly AuCoin) and his wife can be his guests for her birthday dinner, Paige and Elizabeth start to recognize that their daughter is growing away from them in a very different direction from what they'd expected. Over dinner, they learn that Paige doesn't want anything of this world, be it a necklace or a bike, capitalism or communism. "What I really want this year is to get baptized," Paige tells them. "It's kind of like an initiation," Pastor Tim explains to a confused Henry. "You wash away your old self and make yourself clean for Jesus Christ," Paige tells her brother eagerly.

It's a profoundly disturbing concept to Philip and Elizabeth. Where most shows might suggest that behind the veil of baptism lies only human psychological needs that can be filled by religious rituals, the couple now perceive profound mysteries, a draw to something they can't understand or divert into another channel. Paige's faith threatens the couple as communists, as atheists and simply as parents of a teenage girl who

thought they knew their daughter. By shifting the baseline perspective of their main characters, “The Americans” gives Christianity the real power it so often lacks in pop culture.

Yes, exactly. Though it’s noteworthy that the conflict *The Americans* has set up for Paige is not primarily between the Christian West and Soviet atheism. It’s between her identity as part of a socially engaged faith community and her parents’ identity as isolated operatives. The church’s political stances aren’t really the point, and neither is Elizabeth and Philip’s specific allegiance. The show has always been more interested in identity than ideology; the church here is not a cipher for one side of the Cold War so much as a location of genuine identity formation. And *The Americans* positions its main characters to be plausibly shocked and frightened by what this new identity implies, by what baptism implies. They take it as seriously as we should but generally do not.

Rosenberg also touches on several other shows’ dealings with Christianity, but she doesn’t mention *The Good Wife*, the only current drama I’d say is even better than *The Americans*. It features a roughly similar side plot: while [protagonist Alicia](#) is not religious, her daughter gets involved with a church on her own. Alicia, however, isn’t shocked or scared by this; she’s just perplexed and a little embarrassed. She loves her daughter, so she tries hard to take it all seriously and learn about it. Sometimes this learning proves handy at work.

That’s America, after all, where life without faith has become quite normal but religion lingers in the air. What would it take for Americans to see faith as truly startling, as something that makes claims on a person—claims that challenge and compete with other claims?