

On *Herrens veje*, church leaders have to justify their existence

The Danish TV series portrays the choppy waters of European Christianity.

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [September 25, 2019](#) issue



Lars Mikkelsen in *Herrens Veje*

The nation of Denmark usually rates high in global measurements of secularism and the rapid contraction of organized religion. How strange, then, to find that country producing an appealing and well-made piece of popular culture based on the church and the dilemmas of clerical life. American viewers will find it eye-opening for the picture it offers of Protestant Christianity in contemporary Europe.

I'm speaking of the Danish television series *Herrens veje* (literally "The Ways of the Lord," but titled in English *Ride upon the Storm*). This 2017–2018 production was enormously popular in its home country (it is available through Netflix). The central figure is Johannes Krogh, a dean in the country's established Lutheran church, together with his two sons, August and Christian.

The series certainly contains elements of soap opera. Johannes (brilliantly played by Lars Mikkelsen) is a tempestuous figure, authoritarian and over-ambitious, with a weakness for adultery. Other family members have their own dark secrets. But the show also gives a provocative portrait of the larger church and the issues it faces. So immediate is its relevance that many Danish churches have formed groups to discuss the themes and ethical debates arising from each episode.

The Lutheran Church in Denmark is intimately allied with the state through a powerful Ministry of Ecclesiastical Affairs. That state control is as baffling to most Americans as is the distinct Danish clerical garb: pastors (both male and female) wear the ruffs and black gowns that were standard in the era of the Reformation. The traditional attire symbolizes the church's deep roots in the nation's history and culture. Johannes can look back on 250 years of clerical ancestors, and his son August is himself a rising star in the church. But are these ministers anything more than civil servant in weird clothes?

Time and again, *Herrens veje* depicts the inner battles of flawed and sinful individuals who are nevertheless determined to fulfill their clerical and Christian role to the best of their abilities. Lars Mikkelsen reports that exploring the contradictions of the character he plays was instrumental in bringing about his own conversion and baptism.

As depicted in the series, the institutional church draws in a large section of the community—people who care deeply about their parishes and call on clergy for the usual rites of passage. One of the show's illuminating features is its frequent use of classic Lutheran hymns, which create and demonstrate the solidarity of believers far beyond what they might find in written works of devotion or theological reflection. Groups and congregations naturally join in such familiar songs, proving yet again that when intellectual faith fades, the hymns are the last things to go.

Christian faith really is fading in Denmark. It exists in an era of militant atheism and faces the growing presence of Islam with the increase in Muslim immigrants. Can a national church really endure in such a setting?

As in real life, the characters in *Herrens veje* regularly have to justify their existence and that of their church and find some kind of accommodation with their non-Christian neighbors. How far should Danish clergy accept and befriend Muslims? How much should they emphasize the very real points of theological division? These

are very live questions for the Danish Church. Real too is the appeal of other non-Christian religions, such as the New Age-y Buddhism-Lite that fascinates Christian.

As a member of NATO, Danish military forces have through the years engaged in deadly combat, and they were deployed as peacekeepers in Iraq. That involvement allows the show to explore ethical issues of war and peace. How much should August, serving as a military chaplain in the midst of combat, preach to the troops on themes of peace and reconciliation? The soldiers are delighted to have him there and crave his blessing—and wonder if he could expand his spiritual services to bless their weapons and vehicles. How far should any clergy person respect wishes that he or she finds superstitious, yet which are so vitally in demand?

Further dilemmas mount. When a crisis drives August to depression and opioid abuse, can he legitimately seek a solution in secular therapy, or must a faithful cleric rely on prayer alone? As a pastor in the state church, can he admit his deadliest inner secret—that he is a mystic who speaks in tongues? Can Johannes turn his medieval church into a sanctuary for obstreperous homeless people, against the express orders of his bishop?

Through the years, English-language media have produced many fine films and television programs that address issues of faith and ethics, sometimes in an explicitly Christian context, and some have looked hard at church issues and controversies. I would be hard-pressed to find a contribution as serious, wide-ranging, and provocative as *Herrens veje*.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Tempestuous faith on Danish TV.”