

Natalie Fritz

TV-Series Review

HERRENS VEJE (RIDE UPON THE STORM), created by Adam Price

DR 1, DK 2017–2018

“Today, in this country, it’s more difficult to confess one’s faith than talk about one’s favourite sex practices.” With these words, Johannes Krogh (Lars Mikkelsen), the charismatic pastor of a parish in Greater Copenhagen, defends the right to believe and calls on his audience to stand up for their convictions just as, he claims, the Muslims across the road do. In this instance, he is speaking not to his congregants but, as a contender for the most prestigious position within the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Denmark, that of Bishop of Copenhagen, principal of the Marble Church. Even though his rhetoric was impeccable and his strong faith almost tangible, Krogh is not selected; the position is given instead to a younger woman, who in Krogh’s eyes – and later in his nightmares – has the grinning face of a devil. After being passed over for the promotion, he drinks until he is hardly able to walk and then has sex with the female assistant to the parish’s gardener in a shed somewhere on the grounds of the stately pastor’s house.

Watching this sequence, the audience realises that this fascinating speaker, this man of God, has a serious problem: he is incapable of controlling his emotions. This drama series, although set in a Danish-Lutheran context, is less concerned with exploring the specific theology of the church or the daily routines of its clergy than with presenting unsettlingly complex questions about faith, religious orientation, rules and community in a globalised society. Although the setting of HERRENS VEJE is genuinely Danish, its universal relevance may help explain why screenwriter Adam Price’s second series for DR1, which comes after the highly acclaimed and award-winning BORGEN (DR 1, DK 2010–2013), is also reaching a worldwide audience.



Fig. 1: Christian (Simon Sears) seeks new orientation © Tine Harden / Arte France.

Of Fathers, Sons and the Gap Between ...

For nine generations, all the men of the Krogh family have been pastors. Johannes's two sons, Christian (Simon Sears) and August (Morten Hee Andersen), were also meant to follow that path, but only the younger, August, fulfilled the destiny, and he now works as a promising pastor within Provost Johannes's district. Christian also once studied theology, but he quit; now he is banned from the Economics Department because of plagiarism (fig. 1).

His mother, Elisabeth (Ann Leonora Jørgensen), tries to comfort Christian, but she does not succeed in calming down her husband. Christian feels unloved by his powerful or almost "almighty" father and is angry with him. The gap between father and son is a result of Christian's disobedience, a behaviour Johannes is not willing to accept. "Obey or fail" seems to be Johannes's motto. And he acts according to it. When he throws Christian out of the family home, Johannes declares with a mean smirk that Christ was the one who "liked happy endings", forgiveness and such, but he, Johannes, believes in consequences. Christian's existence is deeply shaped by feelings of inadequacy and a desperate wish for Johannes's approval.

August also seeks his father's attention. He leaves Denmark to serve as an army chaplain in a Middle Eastern war zone. During an attack, August feels forced to fire –

even though he is a pacifist and as a priest not allowed to – and kills a civilian. He returns home deeply traumatised and the face of the dead Muslim woman haunts him day and night. When August tells his father what has happened, Johannes advises him not to confess his deed to the bishop as it would cost August his job and – not to forget – damage Johannes’s reputation. He also advises August not to see a psychiatrist or take psychotropic drugs. Were he to do so, Johannes explains, August would no longer be able to hear God’s voice, a gift that marks him both as chosen by God and as a member of the Krogh family. Here Adam Price weaves a dense web of cross-media references that situate the plot in a specific cultural and cinematic context. The reference to Carl Theodor Dreyer’s great drama *ORDET* (*THE WORD*, DK 1955), in which another Johannes, the second son of a rich farmer, exhibits signs of mental illness after studying Søren Kierkegaard and believes himself to be Christ, is obvious. Johannes of *HERRENS VEJE* also constantly condemns society’s lack of faith. In August, he detects a fierce faith paired with the gift of rhetoric – for him the most important instruments for a clergyman. August must therefore keep his ears open to receive God’s words, that he might preserve his own faith and persuade others. But how can one keep one’s faith as one’s doubts grow stronger and there is no one there to save one?

“My God, My God, Why Hast Thou Forsaken Me?” – of Faith and Self-Doubt

The “almighty father”, the character Johannes likes embody in public, is too much of a narcissist and egotist to recognise the problems that trouble his own family (fig. 2). Every setback – his rejection as bishop, Christian’s dropping out or Elisabeth’s affair – lead to new doubts, which he tries to suppress with alcohol or religious fervour. Johannes’s ambivalent nature makes him very human, showing the man behind the mask and knocking the priest – the human *exemplum virtutis* – off his pedestal. Yet the audience may be unsettled to see that those who are supposedly moral authorities do not necessarily practise what they preach.

As a true believer, Johannes is eager to spread God’s word, but as a human being, he makes poor decisions and feels inadequate when the unexpected happens. This charismatic and credible spiritual leader is a man with doubts, but his doubts are never about God’s existence – maybe the one thing he is sure about – only about his own suitability and capacities as a pastor. His conviction distinguishes him from another well-known pastor in film history, Tomas Ericsson (Gunnar Björnstrand), protagonist of Ingmar Bergman’s *NATTVARDSGÄSTERNA* (*WINTER LIGHT*, SE 1963). Having served in the Spanish Civil War, Ericsson doubts God’s existence as he struggles with the problem of theodicy.



Fig. 2: Johannes (Lars Mikkelsen) is a charismatic pastor © Tine Harden / Arte France.

Struggling with self-doubt, Johannes begins a dialogue – actually a monologue – with God, whom he implores to answer his questions or show him a sign that will reassure him of God’s presence. In these scenes Johannes acts manically, angrily spitting out all his doubts and concerns, desperately seeking confirmation and with that confirmation, peace. The audience is thus prompted to rethink the origins of Johannes’s faith: does it stem from religious conviction or is it perhaps the manifestation of an inherited mental illness (Johannes’s father also was able to “hear” God)?

Both of Johannes’s sons try to fulfil their father’s wishes and follow his path. Just as their father feels unheard by his heavenly father, the two sons feel unheard by their father. The consequences are serious: August follows his father’s recommendation that he does not talk about what happened abroad and does not seek medical help. He compensates for his guilty conscience with a pseudo-religious activism that leads to two haunting television moments that remind us of lyrics from the series’ main theme: “God moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform”.¹ We, the audience, witness how August’s intense prayers prevent the deportation of

1 The main theme music of *HERRENS VEJE (RIDE UPON THE STORM)* was written and produced by Claus Hepler and Dragonborn, who adapted the words of the hymn “God Moves in a Mysterious Way” (1773). The hymn itself adapts the words of a poem by the English poet William Cowper, “Light Shining out of Darkness” (1773). For more information on Cowper see <https://www.britannica.com/biography/William-Cowper> and <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/william-cowper> [accessed 2 September 2019].



Fig. 3: August (Morten Hee Andersen) speaks in tongues at the Pentecostal service © Tine Harden / Arte France.

a failed asylum seeker – or is it the reactions of his fellow passengers on the plane that lead the pilot not to take-off? Was the outcome a result of God’s intervention or of human action (perhaps inspired by the Christian ideal of charity)? The show does not give clear answers but offers an explanation that mixes both points of view in its use of magic realism, a narrative and aesthetic style that combines real, imagined and magical (or at least inexplicable) elements. Thus, the showrunners do not provide a global explanation of the events but leave it to the audience to decide which approach (more scientific or more open to the religious/transcendental) fits better within their own worldview. Formally, the cross-cutting between August’s prayers in the church and the events on the plane creates not only simultaneity but also an equality: these approaches stand side by side as equally possible perspectives.

Still, later, when August speaks in tongues at an outdoor Pentecostal service and a sudden wind blows through the seated congregation, a religiously based approach will make sense of the events (fig. 3). A more factual approach, limited to August’s mental state or an inaccurate weather forecast, would be unsatisfactory, and consequently, the showrunners do not use cross-cutting here. Instead we see August’s ecstatic preaching and the congregation’s reaction to his (or God’s?) impressive performance.



Fig. 4: A true idyll? The Krogh family at dinner: f.l.t.r. Christian (Simon Sears), Elisabeth (Ann Eleonora Jørgensen), Johannes (Lars Mikkelsen), August (Morten Hee Andersen) and his wife, Emilie (Louise Bernth) © Tine Harden / Arte France.

Through Johannes and August, the series shows how the work and social status of a pastor have changed and the challenges with which a pastor is confronted: living a religious vocation in a pluralist, globalised and multicultural community is not easy. The search for new ways to encounter people is hard and requires tolerance and open-mindedness as well as an ability to compromise.

And Where Are the Women?

“Which sacrifices are you willing to make for your faith?” This is one of the recurring questions of the series. The male protagonists are not alone in having to respond to this question, for the central female figure, Elisabeth, is also forced to make choices. She has been the perfect pastor’s wife, supporting Johannes, silently enduring his unpredictable moods and keeping the family together (fig. 4), but then decides to end this farce.

Elisabeth is not willing to accept Johannes’s behaviour any longer or to abandon Christian. She begins an affair with her Norwegian lodger, Liv (Yngvild Støen Grotmol), who pays her the fond attention of which her egocentric husband is incapable.

Johannes's female rival is independent, believes in shamanistic rituals, in the power of nature and in her own skills. Even though the lesbian sex scene has a somewhat voyeuristic character and appears to satisfy primarily a male gaze, its symbolic quality unfolds through cross-cutting with a feast attended by the parish staff – due to various reasons set on Good Friday: scenes with the party getting out of control are contrasted with scenes of Liv and Elisabeth's sexual encounter that – like the party – becomes increasingly passionate, uncontrollable until... cross-cut... the parish's garden is set on fire (as a climax) by accident. Johannes leaves the party early, and while looking for Elisabeth, sneaks into Liv's room, where he finds both women naked and asleep. A broken man, he departs along the corridor accompanied by George Frideric Handel's "Lascia ch'io pianga – mia crude sorte" (Let me weep over my cruel fate). This last scene from Season One connects the Passion of Christ at the very day on which it is commemorated with the experiences of Johannes, as stories of very human failure and loss. But although these parallels are obvious, the audience perceives Johannes not as a martyr but as a man who made wrong choices and now suffers as a result. Silently crying, this seemingly formidable man who has been outrivalled by a woman drowns in self-pity and drinks until he loses both consciousness and his self-esteem, whereas Elisabeth grows stronger and wins back her self-confidence because of Liv's care.

With Liv, the showrunners skilfully introduce a protagonist who as an outsider sheds light on a metalevel on well-known but still unresolved gender problems within contemporary Christian churches. The mystic but attractive "woman from the North" – a popular figure in Scandinavian saga literature – helps Elisabeth notice and overcome patriarchal structures and heteronormative worldviews that have been legitimised on religious grounds for too long. At a time when #MeToo debates are reaching the churches, Elisabeth's emancipation can be read as an allegorical vision of future churches' emancipation from old concepts and embrace of a new interpretation of biblical narratives that fits better with life today.

Conclusion

The first season of *HERRENS VEJE* ends with chaos, betrayal and even death – how the screenwriter will find a way out of this mess and who will keep his/her faith are intriguing narrative threads to be picked up in a second season. *HERRENS VEJE* is a drama series that – even though it sometimes tends towards pathos and exaggeration– dares to explore the delicate field of personal faith and its impact upon one's actions and experiences. With its dense web of references to popular culture and many complex questions teased out in the plot, it not only is a perfect example of

intelligent audio-visual entertainment but can also serve as material for seminars on audio-visual approaches to religion. Audience and critics were enthusiastic, and the Danish Broadcasting Company DR immediately ordered a second season, which has already been broadcast in a number of countries.

Seasons 1 and 2 of HERRENS VEJE (RIDE UPON THE STORM) are available on Netflix, Amazon, Hulu and other platforms under the series' original title.

Filmography

BORGEN (Created by: Adam Price, DR 1, DK 2010–13).

HERRENS VEJE (RIDE UPON THE STORM, Created by: Adam Price, DR 1, DK 2017–2018).

NATTVARDSGÅSTERNA (WINTER LIGHT, Ingmar Bergman, SE 1963).

ORDET (THE WORD, Carl Theodor Dreyer, DK 1955).