

A Doctor of the Church?

Adapting Anglicanism in science fiction

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Introduction: Church, State and Science Fiction

Statistics and the people who interpret them both have a tendency to be depressing, especially if the statistics are about the Anglican Church and the person interpreting them is a former archbishop of Canterbury. In November 2013 Lord Carey of Clifton, archbishop of Canterbury from 1991 to 2002, warned in public comment that the Church of England was in crisis. Speaking of Church leaders, including himself, he insisted that ‘we ought to be ashamed of ourselves’ for lack of action.¹ His comments were widely reported in the British press, accompanied by a slew of commentary and opinion pieces on the Church’s decline.² Whatever the accuracy or validity of Carey’s comments, they intersect with widely discussed issues in the Anglican Communion, including divisive crises relating to the ordination of homosexual clergy and the appointment of women to the episcopate, as well as the evident numerical decline of the Church. A yet broader context

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for Carey's forthright and pessimistic observations comes from a widely reported sense of challenges facing the Church expressed on multiple levels, from a declaration from Family Court judge Sir James Munby that British law is now secular in outlook and application, to the stark financial pressures facing a Church with fewer worshippers but the same number of old and expensive buildings to maintain.³

It is perhaps unsurprising that an institution facing such challenges has turned to a popular and optimistic source of inspiration. Like the Church of England itself, *Doctor Who* is an emblem of Englishness.⁴ Like the Church, it has waxed and waned in its popularity and acceptance. A long-running science-fiction television programme made by the BBC about an alien time traveller, *Doctor Who* ran from 1963 to 1989, and a revived series commenced in 2005 and in 2014 is still in production. The programme sits heavily in popular consciousness in terms of its ratings impact, its media presence and its global reach. In recent years, moreover, both clergy and organisations within the Church of England have turned to the show as a means of articulating Christian teachings and making the Church's message popularly relevant with young people. In 2008, the Church Army organised a 'Youth Day' in which selected scenes from the programme were shown to participants and various Christian inferences extrapolated from them.⁵ Since 2008 the Church has encouraged clergy to use allusions to the programme in sermons as a means to appeal to a younger demographic who are increasingly staying away from Church of England services.⁶

This paper explores the Church's decline as it has been used for dramatic purposes in recent popular culture. *Doctor Who* is a product of adaptation, meaning the programme's creators have consistently pulled inspiration for narratives, characters and themes from an eclectic array of sources, ranging from classical literature to westerns to high-brow science fiction.⁷ In more recent storylines there has been adaptation from the current commentary on Anglican decline and, in particular, the issues of sexuality and gender that can be located at the heart of recent public discourse about the Church. This adaptation significantly complicates, in a way not hitherto considered, the use of themes, tropes and characters from the programme by clergy to make their message 'relevant'. This appropriation of *Doctor Who* by clergy was, incidentally, much derided in the British press, but also possibly misplaced. Had they looked more closely, Anglicans using *Doctor Who* to

evangelise may have found a complex but surprisingly optimistic message about their Church.

Send for the Doctor

Doctor Who may seem a logical resort for the Church Army or for vicars in their attempts to reach out through more imaginative preaching and evangelism. The programme is enduringly popular, its narratives are engaging and creatively written, and there certainly are themes and analogies from the programme that transfer easily from popular culture into religious discussion. More broadly still, *Doctor Who* is a product of a British popular culture that, even in the post-war period, is steeped in its Christian heritage, including in its canon CS Lewis's perennially popular Narnia stories, with their veiled allegories of biblical narratives and themes.⁸ Stories about the defeat of cosmic evil by a force for good emerge from a Christian cultural matrix. Nor is there any particular novelty in the Church attempting to make its message more relevant. A range of such measures were brilliantly lampooned in Richard Stilgoe's comedy song 'Mrs Beamish', including the use of guitars and tambourines, the modernised language of the prayer book, and the rise of the 'trendy vicar', to all of which 'Mrs Beamish' responds 'Don't whisper "peace be with you"—this is the C of E! So bend the knee, say "thou" and "thee"—and keep your hands off me!'⁹ The appropriation of the Doctor, his space-time craft the TARDIS and his enemies the Daleks, is just the latest step of many to make the Church and its message more relevant.

As part of these attempts to modernise and to make the Church 'relevant' in terms of how it communicates its message, clergy have been shown clips of the character of the Doctor being held aloft by robotic angels and asked to think of it as symbolically alluding to the resurrection of Christ. Clergy have also been asked to consider if the evil Daleks (the Doctor's archenemies) can be used to help explain moral evil, and they have been encouraged to utilise stories that reflect themes such as salvation and sacrifice, all points that are taken from symbolism detected in the visuals and diegesis (or plotting) of the programme.

But in searching for more allegorical content, Church leaders have overlooked more direct portrayals of the Church, its clergy and its teachings, where the Church is not present in some allegorical form but is simply presented as itself. The nature of this portrayal should give Church members using *Doctor Who* as an agent for communicating their message some pause

for thought. As I have argued elsewhere, the portrayal not of Christianity in general but of the Church of England in particular in *Doctor Who* is overwhelmingly hostile.¹⁰ While the Church Army has been seeking out allegorical messages, they have overlooked the fact that the direct portrayal of their Church seems very negative. Much of this hostility is attributed by reviewers, bloggers and commentators to the overt atheism of Russell T Davies, the head writer of the successful 2005 revival of the programme.¹¹ This attribution is, however, only partially explanatory because a negative portrayal of the Church of England runs across many of the different production regimes and eras from the last 50 years. In *The Dæmons* (1971), for example, the story centred on a vicar who is exposed as both an alien criminal and a devil worshipper, akin to the satanic Canon Copley Style from Dennis Wheatley's 1953 novel *To the Devil, A Daughter*. In *The Awakening* (1984) a beautiful English village church is blown sky high by an alien monster. In *The Curse of Fenric* (1989) the protagonist is an English vicar who has lost his faith and is gruesomely killed by alien vampires who attack his church. Another Anglican clerical character appears in *Ghost Light* (1989), which is set in the nineteenth-century. After a dispute with a Darwinian scientist the clergyman is promptly turned into an ape in a brutal scientific demonstration that evolution may be reversed. None of these stories was written or created by Davies; rather, they testify to a recurrent anticlerical strain of storytelling in *Doctor Who* that locates the Church and its clergy as a site of preternatural menace, suffused with intellectual and spiritual weakness.

The negative impulses toward the Church of England and its clergy recur in stories made since the 2005 revival. In a range of episodes, including *Father's Day* (2005), *The Runaway Bride* (2006) and *The Unicorn and the Wasp* (2008), clergy are variously attacked, disrupted or killed by alien menaces, or even unmasked as alien creatures. Although the number of storylines in which Anglican clergy appear are actually small in terms of the total number of episodes made over the last fifty years of interrupted television production, they do form a recognizable and recurring subset of narratives within the broader programme. They also testify to a persistent preoccupation among *Doctor Who's* different producers, writers and script editors with juxtaposing the Church and the alien, with the Church usually coming off worse from the encounter.

Adapting Anglicanism

It is clear that cumulatively *Doctor Who* does not seem to have anything very positive to say about the Church of England. Its clergy are weak, limited and sometimes even alien, its physical presence is effaced by bombing and destruction and, at a deeper ontological level, the cosmology and the cosmogony of the Church (the way it explains how the universe is ordered and its narratives of creation and origin) are confounded by alien intrusion into earthly knowledge. It may therefore be unwise for the Church Army and clergy to use the programme as a means of communication, notwithstanding negative press coverage of this strategy.¹² Yet this impression is not the totality. Contemporary public discourse on the apparent decline of the Church is of course preoccupied with the future, and where and how the Church will be in years to come. Carey cautions that the Church is at risk if it does not take action to reverse decline, a prediction echoed elsewhere by pessimistic warnings that other western sectors of the global Anglican Communion, including the Anglican Church in Canada and the Episcopal Church in the United States of America, will cease to exist within a generation.¹³ Given this focus on the future, the forging of thematic links with a science fiction television programme that is about time travel, and where the titular character can travel into the future, begins to make sense. The Doctor after all is a time traveller and the programme is as obsessed with the future as are many commentators on the Anglican Church. The storylines listed above, which portray the Anglican Church so negatively, are mostly set in the present day. Among the programme's most recent stories, however, are several that are set in the very far future, but which imagine the continued existence and vitality of the Anglican Church.

The Anglican Church, replete with bishops, vergers, clerics, religious architecture containing transepts and many other reassuringly familiar attributes, appears in stories set in the 51st and 52nd centuries, far beyond our generation which some senior church leaders believe will mark the *terminus post quem* of the Church of England. In storylines including *Time of Angels*, *Flesh and Stone* (2010), and *A Good Man Goes to War* (2011) the Church still exists several thousands of years from now. More significantly still, the portrayal of this futuristic Church is far removed from any sense of embattled decline, crisis or extinction. The Church is shown in this story as a dynamic and forceful institution. Its (literally) militant clergy assist the Doctor to fight an alien menace in *Time of Angels* and *Flesh and Stone*. In *A*

Good Man Goes to War the Anglican clergy are no longer the Doctor's allies, yet they remain a force to be reckoned with. These churchmen are at once familiar and different. Their titles (bishop, verger) are unchanged and so is their vocabulary; they even travel on a spaceship which has a 'transept'. But they are also militarised, fighting their good fight with guns. Even this is not necessarily too different from aspects of the historical Church of England, if one goes back far enough. After all, in 1688 King James II told Bishop Henry Compton of London that he 'spoke more like a colonel than a bishop'.¹⁴

Questions arise from these storylines featuring the futuristic Church of the 51st and 52nd centuries. Why is the Church part of the narrative? Why is it shown with such a mixture of the clerical and the military? And what conception of the institution does the programme have? Significantly, the aspects of the Church of the future which *Doctor Who* narratives foreground are two controversies which currently inform the discourse of crisis around the Church of England: the ordination of homosexual clergy and the appointment of women bishops. The Church of the far future is at ease with these questions. In *A Good Man Goes to War*, two male characters are introduced with the following dialogue:

Thin one: 'Hello, I'm the thin one. This is my husband.
He's the fat one.'

Lorna: 'Don't you have names?'

Fat one: 'We're the Thin Fat Gay married Anglican
Marines. Why would we need names as
well?'

Why indeed! The breezy, rather blasé way in which these characters announce their homosexuality, their married state and their religious affiliation might prompt most Anglicans in the year 2014 to worry about much more than nomenclature. This concatenation of homosexuality, marriage, Anglicanism and military status (they are Marines) seems at first a strange and jarring jumble. The Marines are, however, perfectly at ease with being not only gay and married but Anglican as well. In the slightly earlier story, *Flesh and Stone* (2010), the Doctor had nonchalantly pointed out that it was the 51st century and 'the Church had moved on'. Indeed it had. In *The Time of the Doctor* (2013) the Doctor comes across the Church once again and finds it headed by a woman. Although this person is not identified as a

bishop (she is instead called the 'Mother Superior') she is in a position of headship over the (still militarised) Church.

Gay married clergy and female leaders, the core of major current controversies about the Church, are brought onto screen in *Doctor Who's* projected vision of the Church in the future. The meaning of this appearance is not entirely clear. To any observer of the Church of England the casual ease with which these social changes are incorporated within Anglicanism will seem at odds with the current temper of discussion in the Church. The General Synod of the Church of England had been formally considering the issue of appointing women bishops since July 2000, when Archdeacon Judith Rose proposed the motion:

That this Synod ask the House of Bishops to initiate further theological study on the episcopate, focusing on the issues that need to be addressed in preparation for the debate on women in the episcopate in the Church of England, and to make a progress report on this study to Synod within the next two years.¹⁵

Since then the Church has moved through various reports and debates, reaching what the *Guardian's* religious affairs editor calls the 'fiasco' of the November 2012 debate in General Synod when the vote to approve women bishops was narrowly defeated, contrary to widely held expectations.¹⁶ Finally in July 2014 approval was given to legislation to appoint women bishops, although none are so far in office and the measure still requires further parliamentary approval.

The more recent storylines of *Doctor Who* are strikingly optimistic compared to those earlier *Doctor Who* narratives which are set in the present day and in which the Church is an institution whose leaders (clergy) are threatened by alien menace. Recent depictions of the Church in *Doctor Who* are also optimistically at odds with other science-fiction portrayals of the Church in the future. It is helpful for a moment to compare the future visions of the Anglican Church in other instances of science fiction. The fact that the Church, its buildings and its rituals may survive into the future is suggested in some works including Alan Moore's graphic novel *V for Vendetta* (filmed in 2006) and *Bicentennial Man* (filmed in 1999 and loosely adapted from the *Robot* series by Isaac Asimov). *Bicentennial Man*, set in the future, shows an Episcopalian wedding taking place in a cathedral surrounded by

futuristic architecture. *V for Vendetta* is set in a future Britain which has been only lightly affected by nuclear war. The Church, its clergy and major buildings, including St Paul's Cathedral, all still exist. Yet the most senior cleric (Bishop Lilliman) is both a puppet of a fascist government and a paedophile. Other iterations of the future Church suggest that it may still maintain some presence, even if in a dystopian world. A cathedral is the scene of the showdown in the 1973 science fiction movie *Soylent Green* and in the 1989 film *Batman*, just as a cathedral had been the setting for the climax of the pioneering science fiction film *Metropolis* in 1927.¹⁷

But other landmark science fiction texts suggest simply that in the future religion has simply fallen away or been effaced. In Ray Bradbury's dystopian 1953 novel, *Fahrenheit 451*, the Bible is just one text among the totality of written works that has been banned and destroyed, and at the novel's conclusion the protagonist, Montag, struggles to remember verses from it. A recent British science fiction television series, *In the Flesh* (2013–14), depicted a Church of England vicar struggling to cope in a world where zombies were abroad in the community and his Church was sliding into irrelevance. These science-fiction texts stand apart therefore from the dynamic, space age Anglicanism presented in *Doctor Who*.

Conclusions

As I have argued in my monograph, *Doctor Who and the Art of Adaptation*, the programme's creative teams are omnivorous adapters of texts, narrative traditions, cultures and current discourses.¹⁸ Stories and sources of all kinds can be adapted to *Doctor Who* storylines. Topical themes and allusions also form the substance of adapted narratives. So it is with *Doctor Who*'s representation of the Church of England. The apparently bizarre mixture of elements of the thin, fat, gay Anglican Marines is to an extent a jumbled but concise summary of major questions facing the Church, as well as causes of division.

What should Anglicans make of this future vision? Set against predictions from even a former archbishop of Canterbury that the Church is at risk, the fact of its existence in the 52nd century is optimistic. Observers and commentators, Anglican and non-Anglican, lay and secular, conservative and liberal, generally identify controversy over homosexuality and female leadership as key issues confronting the Church (even if interpretations of course differ: more conservative Anglicans tending to view one or both of

these issues as a temptation to depart from orthodox doctrine and practice, while liberals fear these issues will hold the Church back). That the Church still exists in the future is one thing, but the fact it is led by a woman and staffed by gay married men is vastly mischievous and provocative on the part of *Doctor Who's* writers. Of course it is possible to think of these stories as frivolous and as tangential to more serious discussion of the Church and its problems. The programme makers themselves were hardly intending to contribute to such discussion. But nonetheless, like all literate science fiction, recent episodes of *Doctor Who* are thought-provoking meditations on current concerns. They certainly can withstand an interpretation showing that two major flashpoints of current controversy, homosexual clergy and women bishops, may be perceived by some as not part of the problem but rather as part of a functional Church that has survived, albeit a Church that is remade in the image of today's prevailing culture. In this sense, the programme's recent episodes are probably more revealing about contemporary British cultural influencers' social progressivism and fetish for toleration, as well as their perceptions of the Church of England. There is also a challenge here for clergy and Church leaders to avoid facile appropriations of pop culture in their cultural exegesis, and to pay attention to deeper, underlying narratives. In any case, a time traveller shows a vision that is of interest to a Church in the present that is currently preoccupied with the future.

Endnotes

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