Doctor Who returns to BBC1 this month, firmly rooted in the world of science fiction. Nevertheless, *Steve Couch* detects a Christian world-view

BBC

Time Lord or messiah?

DOCTOR WHO is a phenomenon again. Despite a 16-year absence from our screens, the 2005 series and an audience-puller special on Christmas Day firmly regained the TV audience that drifted away between Tom Baker's glory years and the painful decline of the late 1980s. It is television's longest-running science-fiction drama.

Apart from the vastly improved budgets and production values (no more wobbly sets or baking-foil spacesuits), the actor Simon Pegg describes the new show as having "grown up". Crucially, it has won over many viewers left cold by previous incarnations of *Doctor Who*, and has introduced serious themes like death, tolerance, sacrifice, good and evil, and how an individual makes his or her way in the world.

So what of religion in this grown-up *Doctor Who*? In a previous era, the Doctor would dismiss any spiritual belief as "superstitious mumbo-jumbo". People should rely on science instead, because "science is better." Early on in the 2005 series, with Christopher Eccleston as the ninth regeneration of the Doctor, it seemed to be business as usual: in the second episode, an announcement on a space station some five billion years in our future intoned: "Guests are reminded that Platform One forbids the use of weapons, teleportation, and religion."

The most obvious anti-religious moment, however, involved the Doctor's greatest foes, the Daleks. The Daleks have always been used to reflect common fears of the day. They first arrived in 1963 — one year after the Cuban missile crisis — as the mutated survivors of a nuclear war. The rise of the far Right in the 1970s brought Daleks remodelled as cyber-Nazis: the self-proclaimed master race of the universe, determined to enslave or exterminate anything that wasn't another Dalek.

Seen in this sociological context, it is significant that the current Daleks have been explicitly associated with religious fundamentalism, which many today consider the greatest danger facing the modern world.

None of this should have been a surprise. The executive producer and chief writer is Russell T. Davies, whose atheism is well recorded. His 2002 drama *The Second Coming* (also starring Christopher Eccleston) concludes after Eccleston's Messiah figure agrees to commit suicide and "close down the family business" in order to free humanity from the oppressive burden of religion. It was never likely that either the Doctor or Davies was going to embrace organised religion or spiritual belief.

But the revised *Doctor Who* is not so predictable. In one episode, the Doctor chastises Charles Dickens for dismissing the possibility that a seance might be more than cheap chicanery. The show's explanation for the success of the seance might have involved non-corporeal aliens rather than spirits, but the Doctor still criticises a committed rationalist for not keeping an open mind to the possibility that there might be more to the world than he can easily explain.

The Doctor also recognises two

Continued overleaf

BBC

Into battle: *above*: David Tennant starring in his first series as Dr Who. Tennant, real name David McDonald, is the son of a former Church of Scotland minister. He has played a clergyman, Mr Gibson, in Trollope's *He Knew He Was Right*. *Left*: Rose, sidekick and romantic interest, played by Billie Piper

Ripon College Cuddesdon

OPEN DAY

11.00am – 5.30pm on Tuesday, 16th May 2006

Come and join us for our Open Day - an opportunity to explore your vocation. Meet students and staff, and discover for yourself whether Ripon College Cuddesdon is the right place for you to train for ministry in the Anglican Church.

RIPON COLLEGE Cuddesdon

For a Prospectus or information on our Open Day please contact:

The College Secretary

Ripon College Cuddesdon

Oxford OX44 9EX United Kingdom

tel +44 (0)1865 874404 fax +44 (0)1865 875431

e-mail enquiries@ripon-cuddesdon.ac.uk

www.rcc.ac.uk

Time Lord or messiah?

Continued from previous page

sides to humanity. At our best, he sees us as resourceful, inquisitive, and indomitable. He sees our potential to bring about great things, and cheerfully accepts the role of Earth's champion, asking would-be invading aliens to show mercy to a puny race taking their first steps in the universe, but capable of so much more. He recognises the admirable elements of human nature — such as Britain's standing up to Germany in the Second World War, even when the task looked hopeless — and finds his faith in humanity often vindicated. Several episodes featured human characters willing to lay down their lives for the sake of others.

At the same time, the Doctor sees the dark side of the human condition. He bemoans closed minds, rebukes selfishness and greed, and is quick to dismiss anyone who falls short of his high standards.

Nowhere is his acknowledgement of the darker side of humanity better summed up than in *The Christmas Invasion,* where Earth is under attack by alien Sycorax invaders. The Doctor challenges the Sycorax leader to single combat, and wins. As the defeated aliens fly away, under instructions never to return, Harriet Jones, the British Prime Minister, in full knowledge that the danger has now passed, orders the Sycorax space ship blasted from the sky. As the ship explodes, the Doctor (now played by David Tennant as the Tenth Doctor) turns on his old friend and calls her a murderer. He reflects on his earlier words to the aliens: "I gave them the wrong warning. I should have told them to run, as fast as they can. Run and hide because the monsters are coming: the human race."

The Doctor recognises both the monstrous sinfulness at the heart of the human condition, and the potential for us to become so much more than we are. We might disagree whether the solution lies in our own hands or in God's, but the diagnosis itself is not so different.

Then there is the question of evil. Davies has said that his *Doctor Who* has no stereotypical mad evil geniuses, because they are not believable. Instead, he wants his villains to have "motivation, and background, and depth, and good dialogue, and a sense of humour". In carrying this through, he displaces the caricature of evil with an attempt to portray complex beings whose subtle motivations and attitudes can lead to evil actions.

Evil has always played an important part in *Doctor Who*, and that provides another parallel between the spirituality of the show and the Christian faith: both can be considered as "dramas of reassurance". Just as the Christian story tells first of humanity's fall and then our redemption, so *Doctor Who* takes us on a journey of horror, fear, and successful resolution.

With fall and redemption in mind, the most uplifting moment of the 2005 series came towards the end of arguably the most frightening adventure: the two-part story set in London at the height of the Blitz. After almost an hour and a half of seeing people turned into soulless, gas-masked zombies, the Doctor manages to reverse the process with a triumphant cry: "Oh, come on, give me a day like this. Give me this one. Everybody lives, Rose. Just this once, everybody lives!"

The fact that a single episode combines both the most terrifying and the most euphoric scenes helps to reinforce the link between the fear of the journey and the joy of the rescue. Critics who condemn the show for being too frightening miss one important fact: the Doctor always wins.

The universe of *Doctor Who*, where evil exists, but where good ultimately triumphs, alludes to a world-view Christians would have no difficulty in embracing. Paradoxically, a scientific rationalist like the Doctor would be unable to offer any such guarantee.

Religion might be banned on Platform One, but it seems that some reflection of a Christian world-view cannot help but find its way into *Doctor Who*, whether that is what the programme-makers intended or not.

Starring David Tennant as the Doctor's tenth regeneration and Billie Piper as his intrepid assistant, Doctor Who *returns to BBC1 in mid-April.*

Steve Couch is managing editor of RE Lessons Online and of Damaris Books. He is the co-author of Back in Time: A thinking fan's guide to Doctor Who, *with Tony Watkins and Peter S. Williams (Authentic and Damaris Books, £6.99* (CT Bookshop £6.30)*; 1-904753-09-4). www.damaris.org/doctorwho*

BBC

BBC

Fundamentalists? *Right*: the Daleks, Doctor Who's greatest foes. *Above*: the Doctor and Rose outside the time- and space-travelling Tardis

'One important fact: Doctor Who always wins'

Affirming Catholicism
Inspiration and hope ⊕ in the Anglican Communion

LIVING THE MAGNIFICAT:

God's Cry for Justice Mercy and Humility

Conference

7 - 10 September 2006

St Chad's College, Durham

Cost (full board): £285

Speakers include:

James Alison (Keynote Speaker); **Shami Chakrabati** (*Liberty*); **Linda Hogan** (Professor of Ecumenics, Dublin); **Bishop Michael Doe** (*USPG*); **Fran Becket** (*Church Urban Fund*); Dr **Mongezi Guma** (*Chair of Government Commission for the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities, and rector of Sophiatown, Johannesburg, SA*); **Bishop Stephen Cottrell** (*Bishop of Reading*).

Booking form: James Randle, St Chad's College, University of Durham, 18 North Bailey, Durham DH1 3RH, Tel 0191 334 3344 j.d.randle@durham.ac.uk

Why do grant-givers ask so many maddening questions?

Maggie Durran

We are filling out forms for several trusts. We are doing what is asked, but it is hard to know why they ask for so much detail about our organisation and what we want to do. Is it all necessary, or is this political correctness gone mad?

A COUPLE of years ago I attended a Big Lottery seminar. One strange fact I learned was that a high proportion of fraudulent applications were sent in by churches. What lesson does this have for you and me?

Every officer of a charitable trust is accountable first to the trustees, who are accountable to the Charity Commissioners for ensuring that all the charity's money is spent properly on the charitable objects of the trust.

To ensure that this happens, considerable information might need to be collected and checked before making payments to applicants. As the applicant church, you may feel it is obvious that you are "good guys", but if a significant grant is being sent your way, expect to have your credentials vetted.

The first typical means of vetting you is your charitable status. Anglican churches (and some other denominations) do not have a charity number from the Charity Commissioners, but each has the status of being an "excepted charity". You will normally have an Inland Revenue number allowing you to claim Gift Aid, which is almost an equivalent.

Then your church annual report and accounts will be expected to conform to the requirements of the Charity Commissioners, and be appropriately examined or audited. Requirements have changed regularly in the past ten years (in the early 1990s a huge push was made toward clarity in charity accounts); *The Charities Act 1993 and the PCC*, commonly known as the Green Book, will help you (from Church House Publishing, or online: www.cofe.anglican.org/info/papers/charact). You will not receive grants from trusts unless your accounts are properly presented and examined. For larger grant-makers, the person who chairs the PCC must sign each copy individually.

Expect to list the members (trustees) of the PCC and at times further information about them.

To ensure financial probity, you can expect to answer questions on how your money is managed — such as the number of signatories required on each cheque, and your bank details. The latter means that payments also can go straight into the bank account. A researcher from a trust might visit you and ask further questions. Even the visit to gain more information is a form of checking to make sure you are doing what you said you would do.

Many trusts and the lottery now often ask for details of two independent referees to contact.

One further question might reflect a different kind of credibility. Trusts often ask for details of disability, ethnicity, and other demographic details about the "organisation". Entering the church postcode on a website will give the trust immediate data about the neighbourhood around the church. The information you provide will show whether the church is representative of its neighbourhood.

So, this information is just another way of being transparent in showing that the church behaves with integrity or probity and can be trusted to spend any grant honourably.