

## Reflection - Where faith and time travel meet

**This month marks an event that took place fifty years ago that has shaped and influenced our culture.**

**I am talking, of course, of Dr. Who, writes Andrew Gerns**

As Doctor Who fans celebrate the series's 50th anniversary Dr Andrew Crome, lecturer in the history of modern



Christianity at the University of Manchester, explains how the time-travelling Doctor allows us to explore different beliefs and ethical viewpoints. A near immortal crossing space and time, followers split over interpretation, characters in strange hats... Perhaps it is no surprise Doctor Who is sometimes described as a form of surrogate religion. However, behind this light-hearted comparison lies a grain of truth, as Doctor Who has continually engaged with important religious themes across its 50-year run.

When the church encounters the Doctor there are sometime surprising results.

Doctor Who has a more complex relationship with Christianity. Clergymen have often been suspect - whether its the Master disguising himself as a vicar in The Daemons (1971), or the unfortunate Reverend Golightly in 2007's The Unicorn and the Wasp, who - much to his surprise -



discovers he is a giant alien insect in disguise and dies cursing humanity's "tribal sky gods".

Yet while some theories of secularisation might suggest Christianity will have all but vanished in humanity's future, recent episodes suggest it survives in some form. Executive Producer Steven Moffat has thus re-imagined a 51st Century Anglican Church as a morally ambiguous paramilitary organisation, complete with ranks made up of bishops, vergers and soldiers with special holy names.

While the Church can ally with the Doctor, as in the 2010 episodes of The Time of Angels/Flesh and Stone; in the 2011 episode A Good Man Goes to War they fight against him, working in tandem with an order of headless monks and a mysterious religious sect known as The Silence.

These varied portrayals should remind us that Doctor Who has no default position on religion, whether positive or negative, and a writer's idea can be adapted by actors, directors and producers to take on themes which might be contrary to their original intention; as we see with Christopher Bailey's frustration at director Peter Grimwade's insertion of the Garden of Eden imagery into Kinda.

Even when a writer or director had greater creative control - as in the case of Russell T Davies in the post-2005 series - religious themes have been interpreted in



unexpected ways. Davies himself experienced this in 2007 with the episode Gridlock.

Originally designed to show a society in which faith caused individuals to be paralysed in inaction until the Doctor's arrival, it featured moving portrayals of communities brought together by hymn singing and faith.