Religion, racism and the Church of England in Doctor Who


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Abstract

This essay builds a case study out of serials from the original 1963-89 run of Doctor Who, to reconsider and refine the oft-accepted notion of the programme as embodying and celebrating Englishness. These stories engage on multiple levels with the clergy, history and beliefs of the Church of England. They are The Daemons (from Season 8, 1971) and The Curse of Fenric and Ghost Light (both from Season 26, 1989). More than 18 years and several changes in production personnel separate the Jon Pertwee story The Daemons from the two 1980s stories starring Sylvester McCoy as the Doctor. It is clear that the makers of Doctor Who across a succession of different production regimes only occasionally approached the Church of England (as opposed to remote and clearly alien religion) during most years of the programme's 1963-89 production, adding impact to the stories which make sustained use of the Church and its clergy. Other dimensions of these stories - the settings, the Gothic trappings and the hidden alien menace - connect them thematically to many other stories, but the presence of clergy as lead characters is unusual. The depiction of the Church and its clergy in these three stories shows the complexity of Doctor Who's supposed encapsulation of Englishness and English identity. The stories were produced in a period when English identity was intensively renegotiated and contested, partly through the impact of multiculturalism, a point central to the narrative of Ghost Light. This renegotiation and contestation took place as the white English population was augmented by waves of immigration. This brought with it the greater visibility of racial difference and the inevitable and concomitant challenge to a national identity based on whiteness.

The British church was a missionary church with figures such as St Illtud, St Ninian and St Patrick evangelising in Wales, Scotland and Ireland, but the invasions by the pagan Angles, Saxons and Jutes in the fifth century seem to have destroyed the organisation of the church in much of what is now England. What eventually became known as the Church of England (the Ecclesia Anglicana - or the English Church) was the result of a combination of three streams of Christianity, the Roman tradition of St Augustine and his successors, the remnants of the old Romano-British church and the Celtic tradition coming down from Scotland and associated with people like St Aidan and St Cuthbert.