‘IT’S BIGGER ON THE INSIDE’ *DOCTOR WHO*:
A THEOLOGICAL ENGAGEMENT WITH CONTEMPORARY TELEVISION:

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by

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Abstract

'It's bigger on the inside' *Doctor Who*:

A Theological Engagement with contemporary television:

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This research addresses a neglected area in the study of theology and popular culture; engagement with television. It argues this oversight by academic theology is to its impoverishment because television is a powerful site of meaning-making in contemporary culture. It works with a popular, long-lived example of British television culture, *Doctor Who* and uses an interdisciplinary approach. It uses empirical data, gathered from panel discussion groups of participants who watched episodes of *Doctor Who*. The research design, using empirical data and an adapted grounded theory method for analysis, avoids the accusation levelled at theologians working in the field of theology and popular culture; they look at the object of their study through a preconceived theological lens and find what they want to see. The resulting codes and categories were brought into conversation with other interdisciplinary academic literature; then with theology, examining the contribution they can make. It argues that engagement with television and its reception gives theologians a way of reading the 'signs of the times' (Ward 2005). This is vital because it reveals the multiple narratives worlds which everyone, including Christians and theologians, are inhabiting. It asserts it is the mundane and ordinary exchanges between the participants which reveal what is sacred (Lynch 2012). Although the empirical data does not immediately identify the participants demonstrating a theological outlook, it is significant theologically because it makes visible what is important to people in shaping and forming their meaning-making. It argues that if theology is like a language (Lindbeck 2009), which native speakers of the community pick-up through participating in the community then this research raises questions about who holds the grammar and how it is acquired within its cultural context.

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Contents

List of Abbreviations

In the chapters including material from the panel group discussions the following abbreviations are used to identify the different groups:

Panel group one in Leicester – LE1
Panel group two in Leicester – LE1
Panel group three in Cambridge – WH3
Panel group four in North London – ED4

Introduction

The seeds for this research were scattered and planted many years ago when I took my first undergraduate degree in English Studies with a minor in Film, including a joint paper in Television Culture. In the early 1990s it was fascinating and exciting to be introduced to all the theoretical approaches I was taught for looking at Film and Television. It was instructive to learn about the studio system in the United States; the economic and historical factors which effected the growth of the film and television industry both here and in America. It broadened my horizons to learn about Psychoanalytic, Marxist, Feminist, genre and auteur theory and use them to think about film and television. It was illuminating to learn about the different ways in which (popular) culture, mass communication and questions concerning the construction of meaning could be addressed and to understand the different levels of power granted to the audience. Yet, it was only in one class, 'Romance and the Woman Reader', offered as part of the English Studies syllabus, that the question of readers' response arose, and this was was one of the reasons I chose to take this paper. I kept wondering, while valuing and enjoying what I was learning about Film and Television studies, where the space was given for engaging with what the people who constitute audiences were making of what they were viewing.

Moving forward a decade, having spent three years at a training college, including doing a further undergraduate degree in theology, I was a new minister. Each Saturday I was finishing my preparation for services the following day and watching episodes of the new *Doctor Who*. As I watched I was struck by the many occasions on which the storyline of the programmes included what I would name as theological concerns; issues to do with life and death, with what it means to be a human being, with questions about time and mortality, salvation, redemption, and sacrifice. Alongside this, I had noticed as a new female member of the clergy, how many people I encountered from outside the church community related to me through their experience of one woman in a dog-collar; a fictional television character called Geraldine Granger. This ranged from the wedding photographer who said to me, 'it's alright love I know how to deal with you, I've seen the *Vicar of Dibley*', to the Mums at the toddler group, who said I was not what they were expecting and whose images it then turned out had been formed by

the same programme. Gradually I came to realise that this television version of a female Anglican priest provided the means through which people were relating to me; it had shaped their understanding of what I was going to be like.

These different seeds were planted and slowing emerging as subjects of interesting reflection when the opportunity came to apply to do a PhD at the University of Leicester with Clive Marsh. I knew that I wanted to investigate the relationship between popular culture and theology but in the beginning, I had no idea what this would mean. At that stage there were many things of which I was unaware; the lack of existing academic work from a theological perspective on television in the British context, the critique levelled at theologians working on popular culture that they had a tendency to 'find' the theological in their subject without considering alternatives and lastly, what would be involved in attempting to do research which took seriously trying to find out what I had noticed was ignored in my first encounters with the study of popular culture, namely what audiences were doing with an example of popular television culture. These are all things which I have discovered on the journey of nurturing, developing and growing those nascent seeds of interest into flowering and flourishing.

This research sets out to acquaint its reader with what was involved in this process, the ground from which I worked, the tools which were necessary and the expert viewpoints which were vital to complete the task of bringing theology into engagement with television using empirical data from audience responses. Chapter 1 and 2 respectively set the scene for the study and outline the methodology. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 explore and reflect on the codes and categories which emerged from the data analysis. Finally, Chapters 6 and 7 bring these into dialogue with theology, arguing for a creative and generative relationship between theology and television based on the empirical data.

In some of the churches I have cared for and worked with, during the week, when the flowers from Sunday have faded or been distributed pastorally, the church would be adorned with artificial flowers. This study is not about creating the same thing theologically, something which looks like theology from a distance but has none of its

life, its vitality, fragility, and beauty. It is about seeking to plant within the field of theology a new hybrid, by transplanting the living matter, which is the study of television and its audiences, into theology. The field of theology consists of many other flowers, this research argues for a place among them for this one. The reader will discover for themselves how successful this has been and if the plant has life, but this is the story of how it was grown.

Chapter One

Setting the scene: The place of this research in the interdisciplinary context of the study of religion, theology and popular culture.

In this first chapter I will indicate and engage with the main areas of reading and study which were necessary to begin the research outlined in the Introduction. The shape of the chapter can be likened to standing at a viewing point, at a height, within the landscape. There is a guide to the points of interest which stretch out before the viewer, and a telescope to see them more closely. This chapter then provides a guide to the landscape of the contemporary study of theology, religion and popular culture by identifying the different points of reference within which this research is located. It explores also the relationships between these significant markers for understanding this landscape and how they will contribute to the research.

The first point of interest is obvious and concerns the context for this study. The space which this research inhabits is interdisciplinary, and therefore, it stands at a point where those different disciplines find a nexus. The horizon of this study is contoured by the cultural context which it inhabits and so the chapter begins with Sociology; examining the debates around the place, status and popularity of religion in post-Second World War Britain. It focuses on Christianity, as the religion which has both most informed the cultural environment historically, and which has therefore been affected by the cultural changes in this period. This is the setting in which this research is located. This broad horizon is then narrowed down, drawing in to locate and examine recent work on the study of theology, religion and popular culture itself, since this is the ground on which this research stands. This leads on into Cultural Studies, not as a further deepening and constraining of perspective but in fact, to widen and deepen it. This is because as work in the field of theology, religion and popular culture has developed, a number of important scholars within it have argued for the use of concepts and research methods from this field (Lynch 2009; Wright 2007). Furthermore, as will be seen, it has provided vital conceptual tools for this research such as the ‘circuit of culture’ (Johnson 1986). Part of the deepening of the exploration here will be to look at the study of audience reception, which is fundamental to this project and originated in

this field of study (Lynch 2009; Wright 2007). The next point of interest is not unrelated either to Cultural Studies, or work regarding audiences, but is distinct, being a section on Television Studies. Here again, the vista begins more generally, and this then focussed on Science Fiction Television as a genre and particularly study of its audiences. This chapter, mapping the landscape of the interdisciplinary academic vista in which this research dwells and to which it will contribute, then concludes, addressing literature on the object of the empirical research, *Doctor Who*. It locates this work within the current academic world of cultural theory, popular culture and work on television.

Standing at the viewing point, surveying the vista ahead, the keen observer will note one significant absence. This first chapter does not have a theology section. Theology is central to this study. It was decided, however, that to counter one of the central critiques of theologians working with popular culture, the theological resources (beyond those which are part of this interdisciplinary context) would be researched and chosen after the empirical work had been done and therefore, in response to it.

Sociology

In relation to this research the area where conversation with sociological study is most fruitful is its work on comprehending and interpreting the place of religion in British post-World War II society. The significant areas of debate which converge most closely with this study concern the statistical decline in active church participation during this period, alongside the relatively few people identifying themselves as atheists and how this is to be understood (Brierley 2005, Bruce 2002, Davie 1994, Garnett et al 2006, Voas 2003). On one side are ranged those who vigorously support the secularization thesis, for whom the Christian Church is irrefutably in decline in Britain, both in terms of statistics relating to attendance, membership, closure of church buildings and use of ritual and rites of passage and in terms of influence in the wider society, non-participative residual belief and or affection (Bruce 2002, Bruce and Voas 2010). On the other are those, chief among them Grace Davie, who resist a completely statistical analysis speaking only of decline. Davie uses the phrases 'believing without belonging' and 'vicarious religion', to try and capture the way in which beyond the statistics there still appears to be a role for and relationship with religion in Britain which challenges the all-encompassing narrative of decline offered through secularization theory (Davie 1994, Davie 2010). As Callum Brown notes, however, just after the turn of the new century, even Davie 'acknowledges that the content of belief is drifting further and further from the Christian norm' (Brown 2001:5). Davie's concept of a 'vicarious memory' of Christianity has pertinence in the context of this study; not in the sense of a committed minority believing and worshipping on behalf of the usually uninvolved majority, but as is it seeks to examine whether those who are watching or indeed creating *Doctor Who* are aware of or even open to, resonances with Christian tradition and theology. Other sociologists, particularly those examining spirituality in the New Age context have pointed to the growing interest in ways of expressing belief beyond traditional Christian rites, rituals and worship (Aupers & Houtman: 2006, Davie, Heelas & Woodhead 2003, Heelas & Woodhead 2005, Heelas 2006, Farias and Lalljee 2006, Lynch 2007c).

For the purposes of this study, the work of the editors and authors of *Redefining Christian Britain: Post 1945 Perspectives* (Garnett et al 2006), was very helpful. They gathered together, debated, commissioned and edited their book precisely because they wanted to try and move beyond the dichotomy of the current debate on religion in post-war Britain, which they believe has come to obscure rather than illuminate meaning (Garret et al 2006:8) It is the contention of the authors that while 'Marxism' and other 'theories of modernization' had met their 'demise' 'by the 1990s' there was one 'last great teleological narrative' which survived; 'a sort of theoretical Cuba in which old believers in theories could continue to rally' (Garnett et al 2006:4). The secularization thesis has remained coherent where other grand theories and master narratives have disintegrated, and it was able to do so partly because it has been able to work objections into its own theory (Garnett et al 2006). Their own description of their motivation in putting together their book is particularly pertinent to this research because it touches on several important aspects of the work undertaken here. These are 'that the stories and metaphors that we use to discuss our histories and define our identities matter' and that the way in which these stories are told 'illuminate particular patterns of thought, revealing how the world is seen and how people seek to shape it' (Garrett et al 2006: 8).

In contrast, while Callum Brown (2001) critiques what he characterises as 'the rather pessimistic view of religion's role in Britain between 1800 and 1963' which is based on secularisation theory and on the progress of secularisation in the British context, he is also willing to picture its ultimate outcome (Brown 2001:9). He charts its development differently, maintaining that rather than being a gradual decline which occurred from the Reformation onwards, through the Enlightenment, modernity, the age of reason, and the Industrial Revolution, the change in Britain's relationship to Christianity, and particularly the Christian church, was something which happened much more abruptly in the 1960s. After centuries of Christianity providing the 'means by which men and women, as individuals, construct their identities and their sense of 'self'', there was a breach which has proved damaging and so far, irreparable (Brown 2001:1). For Brown, part of understanding this to be case, is the willingness to 'imagine' the end result, that at some stage in the future, the death of Christian Britain will happen (Brown 2001:3). In examining this possibility and how it has come about, Brown coins the phrase 'discursive Christianity' using modern cultural theory. He asserts that most historical

and sociological studies of religion and society in the British context have thought about religion in 'four forms', namely, institutional Christianity, intellectual Christianity, functional Christianity and diffusive Christianity (Brown 2001:12). He adds to this the concept of 'discursive Christianity' which he argues is foundational to the other four and the thing which has been so sharply eroded in Britain since the 1960s. The discourse of 'discursive Christianity' is what shapes and inducts people generation by generation into the expected way of behaving and understanding one's identity, expressed through dress, speech, economic activity and behaviour (Brown 2001).

> The discourses may be official ones from churches or clergy, public ones from the media, 'community' ones from within an ethnic group, a street or a family, or private ones developed by the men and women themselves. The discourses will tend to be uniform, though the protocols need not be... (Brown 2001:13).

Brown asserts that to have or maintain 'popular participation' and 'social significance' within British society, 'discursive Christianity' must be there as a base. When it is eroded, its popularity and significance decline (ibid:14). This is an important concept for this book, particularly as the start of *Doctor Who* in the 1960s coincides with period in which Brown identifies the huge sea change in Britain's relationship to Christianity.

I end this section by drawing attention to two related concepts, linked to the sociology of religion, which became significant during the analysis and interpretation of the empirical data. This are Edward Bailey's 'implicit religion' and Gordon Lynch's 'sociology of the sacred' (Bailey 1998; Lynch 2012). As will be seen, both the concepts provided a means by which to locate the empirical data with the contemporary British cultural and religious context. 'Implicit religion' ask the question whether what may appear secular in everyday life in fact retains some elements of the religious; while Lynch's concept of the 'sociology of the sacred' argues that it is necessary and helpful to differentiate between a sociology of religion and a sociology of the sacred when researching and thinking about contemporary society and culture and the discourses which under lie its life (Bailey 1998; Lynch 2012).

Religion, Theology and Popular Culture

The burgeoning field of the academic study of religion, theology and popular culture seeks to investigate, understand and interpret, where and how metaphysical, moral, ethical and theological questions are being asked and answers constructed in popular culture (Cobb 2005, Lynch 2002, 2005, 2007a, 2007b, 2009, Marsh 1997, 2004, 2007a, 2007b, 2009, Wright 2007, 2009). Gordon Lynch calls it 'a maturing discipline' which has experienced 'considerable consolidation and increasing sophistication' over the last thirty years (Lynch 2007a:1). This interest has arisen from an acknowledgement that whilst the influence and understanding of the Christian religion and theology in particular has significantly decreased in post-war Britain, people's consumption and use of popular culture as a reference point has developed and become natural (Beaudoin 1998, Marsh 2007a, Lynch 2002).

> ...most students now approach theological questions against the background of the stimulus of popular culture. In contemporary Western culture, in other words, theological interests and questions are always in part *shaped* by popular culture (Marsh 2007a:2).

Within Theology and Religious studies departments, however, those wishing to pursue this area of research have had to frequently make a case for the validity of their work (Schofield Clark 2007). Popular culture is often still seen as something suspect by those working in the academic study of theology and religion. This view, while changing and developing still remains an important backdrop to and aspect of both the historic and ongoing relationship between theology, religion and popular culture.

Having convinced those within their departments and field who dismiss popular culture as of little value, those academics interested in this area of study are confronted by the same questions which have arisen in the field of cultural studies, what is the subject of their research? As David Morgan notes convincingly, there are many things which can

legitimately be recognised as belonging to the array of objects, behaviours and experiences which could legitimately be recognised as having religious significance in its broadest sense because of the way in which they are used to construct and sustain worldviews and associated practices in life. Alongside this, he also notes, that so these things are so extensive and influential in that it is hard to identify what precisely counts as 'popular culture' (Morgan 2007:21). In parallel with this observation, another pertinent one needs to be held in tension, that because of the diverse and diffuse nature of popular culture, particularly as it is changing and developing in the twenty-first century, it must be recognised in the British context that it becomes more difficult to identify aspects of culture which are popular across a wide spectrum of participants and audiences.

Much of the work conducted so far in this field, especially in the British context, has concentrated on film as an expression of popular culture (Deacy 2009, Marsh 2004, 2007a, Wright 2007). This may be because there has been at least a tacit agreement with Johnston's comment about film, that it is now 'our Western culture's major storytelling and myth-producing medium' (Johnston 2007:16). It could also be that pragmatically film provides some helpful boundaries for the study of popular culture from a theology and religion perspective. Films can be viewed and treated as a discrete object for study, even if they need to be related to other films in the same genre or by the same director or on the same theme. Or, it could simply be that film is somehow deemed to be more 'respectable' than television. This is borne out by Hoover's observation that it 'has long since achieved a status in most elite circles as at least potentially a kind of 'art' (Hoover 2006:272). This status has meant, that until relatively recently, it has had more traction in being accepted as an appropriate area for theological study and reflection.

Whatever the reason(s) are, those coming from a theology and religion perspective have so far, in the British context at least, shown more interest in film and latterly in popular music and new media, than television. Books are written from a faith-community perspective on popular television programmes (e.g. Couch, Watkins & Williams 2005, Bertonneau and Paffenroth 2006). Whilst, however, they seek to identify theological themes of interest to those who share their viewpoint, they are less concerned to ask or

answer questions about meanings which may be derived from these popular cultural texts by those not already religious. Nor, in many cases, are they overly concerned with engagement with other academic disciplines and their approaches to and understanding of television. As will be examined later in this chapter, this negligence diminishes the capacity for religion and particularly, theology to engage effectively with what other disciplines offer and contributes to the sometimes-inattentive attitude they in turn can exhibit towards religion and theology.

In the wider field of theology, religion and popular culture, the use of theological themes to investigate and interpret films is not limited to those wishing to employ film to articulate particular expressions of the Christian faith. It has also been utilized by academic scholars as a starting point to explore the relationship between theology, religion and popular culture (Deacy 2004, Marsh 2004, 2007a). In *Theology Goes to the Movies: An introduction to critical Christian Thinking* (2007) Marsh offers 'a systematic theology through film', using such theological categories as 'God', 'Redemption', 'Sacraments' and 'Church' as a lens through which to explore various films. The practice of going to the cinema has also been likened to a religious one (Lyden 2003, Marsh 2004).

This study is indebted to the academic work which has gone before it in this field. The recognition that popular culture, religion and theology, are intimately related through the ways in which they shape the world and its meaning for human beings is vital for this study. Theological work which has used film, music and other media to explore the ways in which this relationship can be characterised and understood are the foundation on which it stands and on which it builds. This research, however, begins by taking a substantially different viewpoint. Instead of starting with theological themes, which are identified by those desirous of using the material for illustrative purposes, of an existing theological theme in example of popular culture and *then* extrapolating from this a relationship between the two things, by drawing a link between these themes and what people *are* doing with popular culture. It begins by investigating what people are doing with popular culture, using empirical research, analysing the data produced and then bringing this into dialogue with theology. By doing things this way round, it sets out to

respond to the criticism of existing work on theology, religion and popular culture which is outlined below.

As mentioned briefly at the start of this chapter, one of the most forceful critiques of academic engagement with popular culture by those from a theological or religion background comes from amongst its own practitioners. It is, unsurprisingly, that those from a theological background have approached the study of film with the academic tools they had to hand from their own discipline. While Lynch, for example, accepts that these are 'valid', he also identifies this as a disadvantage which has limited the academic study of theology, religion and film. He holds the literature produced in field to account, saying it 'has at times proceeded with little more than a shallow engagement with the questions, theories and methods' which would be used by 'other approaches to the study of film' (Lynch 2009:275). On occasion it has even been questioned whether film is being studied at all (Lynch 2009, Wright 2007) or if what a practitioner coming from the theological and religion sees in a piece of popular culture is what is picked up by others who engage with it. Lynch gives the example of Tom Beaudoin's reading of the video for 'Losing My Religion' by REM, which is used to support the idea that those who belong to 'Generation X' are looking for a Jesus who is set free from the constraints of the institutional church. Whilst Lynch acknowledges that this is 'a stimulating interpretation of the music video', he has also found that in discussion with his students it is not one they would use (Lynch 2005:163). This highlights the way in which a piece of popular culture can be interpreted in different ways which are shaped by the interpreter's own situation, background and concerns and therefore, those doing so from a theological or religious perspective need to exercise caution in assuming that what they 'see' or 'understand' is identical to other people's perceptions.

Both Wright and Lynch have suggested that a more authentically interdisciplinary approach would facilitate a more fruitful engagement with popular culture. Both they, Schofield Clark (2007) and Morgan (2007) have made the case for the use of cultural studies. Lynch has also made the case for the use of a sociological reading of film (Lynch 2007b and 2009, Wright 2009). Wright and Lynch also reference Johnson's concept of the 'circuit of culture' as a useful one, while Morgan notes the 'circulation of

culture' in which popular culture is characterised not as a fixed object but one which has 'fluidity' and 'transience' (Lynch 2009, Morgan 2007:26, Wright 2009). From his own experience of conducting empirical research on the British club scene, Lynch draws the conclusion that it is vital to supplement theoretical approaches from a theology and religion perspective on popular culture with investigations of its significance for those who are participating in it. Without such work he suggests the theoretical will fail to adequately represent or resonant with the ordinary, everyday experiences of people engaging with popular culture. It has also been noted, however, there can be pitfalls in attempting to be truly interdisciplinary: 'how are students to be trained' and 'who is going to be interested in the resulting work?' (Morgan 2007:25).

In recent years, like cultural studies, the study of theology, religion and popular culture has seen a growing interest in empirical research; trying to explore, understand and interpret what the audience is 'doing with' popular culture, how it is consumed and received. Lynch states that although the value of this research is increasing, it requires further development (Lynch 2009, Strasberg & Engler 2011). Marsh argues that 'paying attention to audience reception' is vital in world of theology, religion and film because doing so does 'justice to what happens to those who actually watch films' (Marsh 2009:255). As Hoover notes, however, this is not as 'simple' and 'straightforward' a thing to do as it might appear (Hoover 2006). The responses people give about their use of the media and television and their possible connection or not to religion or theology are affected by a number of varying factors; their own religious affiliation or lack of it, their age, their socio-economic situation, their context within family life e.g. whether they are a parent and believe they need to influence or even control their children's use of media and television viewing (Hoover 2006). Even those who endorse and encourage research using audience research, recognise that it is not an easy thing to accomplish well (Hoover 2006, Marsh 2009). Both the means by which to gain access to 'what 'ordinary cinema-goers' are actually making of or doing with films' and the 'questioning process' itself' can be fraught with pitfalls (Marsh 2009:255). These can range from how to recruit people to answer questionnaires, or be interviewed or participate in discussions, to how to frame the questions in order not to 'skew' the responses (Marsh 2009:255).

Here again Lynch finds reason to critique those who have engaged in audience reception from a theology and religion standpoint namely, Deacy (2005) and Marsh (2007b). In Lynch's view this work is still too bound up in a theological agenda which sets out to discover that film is being used for 'meaning-making' and is therefore an 'implicit theological resource which people use for making sense of their lives' (Lynch 2009:285). Lynch argues that although those engaging with a piece of popular culture may well find that it provides material for making meaning in their lives, 'this meaning is not necessarily (or indeed usually) at the level of existential meanings or theological understandings about the meaning of life' (ibid). Lynch believes that what is required is a broader approach to the ways in which film, in this instance, functions in people's lives which leaves plenty of space for it *not* to function in a religious or existential fashion and allows 'more mundane meanings that films may have for their audiences' (Lynch 2009:285). Lynch, however, does not clarify what a 'more mundane' reading is or might be. Lynch's general point about the way in which theological engagement, with the search for and understanding of how meaning-making is happening with and through popular culture, can become too thoroughly shaped by its own concerns is one which this research takes seriously. It has informed the way in which it has been designed, using empirical data to avoid making assumptions about what people are doing with popular culture and leaving room for what Lynch characterises as 'more mundane' readings, in contrast to theological or existential ones.

Lynch does describe as productive, the work of Marsh (2004), Miles (1996) and Watkins (1999) on the film-viewing experience itself, which he asserts moves the agenda away from simply identifying the religious or theological themes in the text of a film and towards a more rounded view which includes watching, looking and listening as religious practice themselves. It is here that Lynch returns to the cultural studies concept of a 'circuit of culture', which he thinks moves the focus in the study of theology, religion and film into a wider panorama that includes production and reception, as well as the text of a film (Lynch 2009). Reflecting on the empirical work in which he has been involved in the United States, Stewart M. Hoover points out that making the connections between use of media and religious or spiritual life takes time for participants. In an interview it cannot be the first bald question the interviewer asks but is one which is touched on and returned to during the course of conversation, and

one where often the interviewer has 'to probe to make those connections'. (Hoover 2006: 112, 141). For the purposes of this study this illustrates the complexity of attempting to explore, and in some way answer, the initial research questions. It also highlights the space that there is for this work, since when this study started there was little sustained work on television from an academic theology and religion standpoint in the British context; nor was there existing research which sought to work in an interdisciplinary way and examine the way in which engagement with audience reception could provide an insightful approach to popular culture for theology. Simply because something is difficult is not a reason to dismiss its validity or use.

Empirical work in the field of theology, religion and popular culture has already been accomplished in the US and British contexts (Hoover 2004 and 2006, Lynch 2005 and Schofield Clark 2005). Some of the conclusions Hoover draws in *Religion in the Media Age* (2006) are important markers for this research. For example, many of the participants in the study seemed to display a similar attitude to screen media as that of some academics in theology and religion departments mentioned above; namely, they revealed that they engage with and enjoy popular culture, often more than they intend to, while simultaneously being concerned about its effects and yet also wanting to say that they do not take it seriously. Hoover particularly signals that way in which television, alongside other visual media, is 'somehow suspect in way that other media, such as books are not'; yet there is 'one exception' to this, 'film, with 'serious' film being among the media that many of our interviewees found particularly meaningful spiritually and morally' (Hoover 2006:272). This begged the question, in preparation for this research, as to whether participants in the British context will demonstrate the same attitude to television, as something which is inherently suspect, at least as a subject of study or source or resource for meaning-making in their lives, while at the same time clearly using it?

In order to think about this in more depth, I engage briefly here with more of the reflections Hoover has offered on his own empirical research. First, Hoover also notes something else which is vital to this study, the sheer overwhelming presence of the media in contemporary society.

> Across all the interviews and observations, from a variety of contexts and perspectives (social, religious, ethnic, and otherwise), no other single thing seems so universal as the sense of ubiquity, pervasiveness, or inescapability of the media. From household to household and interview to interview, all share in common an assumption – even an expectation – that the media are universal and 'taken for granted'. They are the *lingua franca* and the common ground of contemporary social and cultural experience and practice.... that the media condition the structuration and tempo of daily life, and the norms, languages, and contexts of social and cultural discourse. (Hoover 2006:265)

Examining this factor in the British context too is vital and provides the foundation for this study, because surely it is important to try and understand what audiences are 'doing' with popular culture from a theology and religion perspective. Second, this 'ubiquity' of the media meant that the families in Hoover's study seemed to accept it as a given and then 'negotiate' their relationship with it.

> They do what John Thompson suggests that people do with the media: they treat their relationship to media as a *mediation*, an interaction of ideas and experiences from media and ideas and experiences from daily life.
>
> (Hoover 2006:266)

Third, significantly Hoover also identifies that where they might have expected when interviewing people about the relationship between religion, spirituality and the media, including people with strongly held religious affiliations, to come across views which were at various with the norm of acceptance and accommodation, this did not happen (Hoover 2006).

> We really did not. Instead, what we found was negotiation between assumed and taken-for-granted media-centered discourses and alternative values and ideals. (Hoover 2006:268)

Interestingly, when a particular participant was aware of the discrepancy between her strongly held religious views and some of the television programmes she chose to watch, she wanted to bring the two together coherently.

> But, they were attractive, compelling, and absorbing for her in the same way they were for millions of others. These programs (and most others) work because they articulate and express important ideas and values that are in play in the culture. (Hoover 2006:268)

This is worthy of specific note for this research because it illustrates the possibility that even when people have another perspective on life and meaning, such as one formed by faith, this does not necessarily entirely shape or determine their relationship with popular culture. In fact, Hoover's research indicates there is a process of negotiation occurring between the different discourses which supply meaning in the contemporary world. These concepts of 'negotiation', 'mediation' and 'participation' with popular culture are ones which are current within research from a theology and religion perspective in the British context as well. There is an increased appreciation that in order to articulate the Christian faith appropriately in the contemporary world, those involved in theology, liturgy, ecclesiology and missiology need to grapple with contemporary popular culture because it shapes and articulates the world in which people live, work, think, reflect and feel (Graham 2007, Ward 2008). The purpose of this study is not to aid a particular venture in mission, liturgy or ecclesiology but to contribute to and develop the way in which the relationship between popular culture and theology is understood.

My personal experience, alongside Hoover's empirical work, demonstrate that human beings are complex. This is turn means their relationship to popular culture will not be a simple or easy one to unravel or assess. There are many things at play in their interactions with television. Indeed, Hoover characterises people's choices about how they use media from his research as far more 'playful' than 'deliberative', in contrast to

the prevailing view around questions of choice and consumption (Hoover 2006). Engaging with media is something people simply 'do' and the way in which they do it 'seems to follow its own logics, not the sort of cognitive, deliberative course that we might have wanted or expected' (Hoover 2006:276).

> What results is a negotiated conditional settlement, one that is open to revision as they continue to seek that feeling of being "fluid, yet grounded."
>
> (Hoover 2006:285

Part of recognising this playfulness and the process of negotiation is being alert to participants in any research being aware of the contradictions themselves; noticing the dissonance between their value systems or expressed faith and the pleasure and enjoyment they find in watching particular television programmes, and the consequent desire to create cohesion between the different understandings of the world.

In the British context, Lynch himself has undertaken empirical research with young people who are part of the clubbing scene 'to ask in what ways, if any, it can be interpreted as serving a religious functions for those who participate in it' (Lynch 2005:167). The research took place over two years and was conducted by Lynch and a post-graduate student. Although some observation of the club scene took place, the substantial part of the data was formed from interviews with thirty-seven people who participated in the clubbing on a regular basis and who viewed it 'as an important part of their lives' (ibid:170). Lynch's comments on the age range, gender and ethnic mix of his participants and the way in which they were recruited raises points of interest for this research. Lynch advertised at a local college and on an internet discussion board, but also recruited people via recommendations from others who had expressed an interest. Although the study had a good age range within the spread of people who participate in club culture, and a mix of gender which roughly reflected the observed attendance at the clubs, Lynch notes that all the participants were white, which also mirrored the attendance at clubs, but not the population of the city in which the research was conducted (ibid:170).

Whilst Lynch discovered that virtually all the participants were suspicious of using words like 'religious' and 'spiritual' to describe their experience of clubbing and were somewhat incredulous that others would do so either, there were elements that 'could provide a useful focus for theological reflection and dialogue' (Lynch 2005: 178). There was a strong sense of clubbing providing a like-minded and open community which was tolerant and diverse, alongside a recognition that some people who took part did not 'fit in' because of their attitude, the so-called 'beer-boys' and 'try hards' (ibid:173). As well identifying the importance of 'these social and communal aspects of club culture', Lynch also discovered that those who participated in the research described their experience of clubbing using 'a broadly similar hermeneutical framework' (ibid: 174). This framework Lynch labels a 'therapeutic discourse' because it orients their experiences towards 'their own psychological well-being and their own-going development' (ibid: 174). Lynch locates this 'therapeutic discourse' within the wider contemporary discourse of the 'reflexive project of self', as identified by social theorists such as Anthony Giddens (1991) and Zygmunt Bauman (2000) (Lynch 2005:175).

> Club culture can therefore be seen as one of many secondary institutions in contemporary Western culture which provide an experiential framework through which people are able to extend their project of the self and develop their relationships with others. (Lynch:178)

None of the participants in Lynch's study described their experience in terms of transcendence. This leaves Lynch asking whether they do not have this experience or any sense of an absolute other in life at all, or if they are unable to articulate it because they have no language or framework within which to process and express it. Leading on from this, Lynch questions whether their inability to articulate a sense of relationship to something absolute or other beyond themselves may limit the potential for transformation which goes beyond the purely personal sense of development to engage with 'deeper questions about the meaning of their lives, that nature of the world in which they live, or their relationship to the absolute reference point of existence' (Lynch 2005:182).

Lynch's research raised a couple of important practical questions for this research. First, where to advertise for participants for the empirical part of the research? The people this study hopes to involve are not as discrete a group as the clubbers, young people who go to a one place at a particular time to engage in a specific activity. This research wants to reach and engage with those who watch *Doctor Who* or simply television, in their own home as a private, domestic activity. Secondly, how to engage with participants in revealing their responses to *Doctor Who*? Furthermore, to do so in a way which does not prejudice the outcome by the questions asked, yet on the other hand, does not ends up with material which discloses little or nothing. Lynch discovered during the pilot phase of his research that virtually all the participants did not use terms like 'religious' and 'spiritual' to articulate their experience, indeed, they were doubtful about their use in relation to clubbing. Following this finding, 'any explicit reference to religion or spirituality' was 'dropped from subsequent interviews' (Lynch 2005:171). This illustrates the importance of the questions being used to elicit discussion and the necessity of framing them to avoid using language which was off-putting, or which suggested particular responses.

In contrast to Lynch's discovery about the lack of transcendence as an experiential category in the British context, Schofield Clark's research in the United States, *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernatural* (2003), on the supernatural as represented in the media and consumed by teenagers, finds plenty of interaction with a realm beyond this world. However, the teenagers who were part of the study were able to differentiate between the fantasy stories depicted in popular television series and the realm of religious teaching about what lies beyond this world. This remained the case, even when they experimented with such things as using Ouija boards, seances or spell-casting; these things were viewed as something done for fun or pleasure, rather than being treated as capable of touching spiritual transcendence or invoking evil (Schofield Clark 2003:226). Yet, amongst the majority of the teenagers, excepting those who were described as having a 'Traditionalist' attitude towards their religious faith, Schofield Clark also notes 'many young audience members do seem to embrace one belief that may best be described as openness to possibility' (ibid:228). Alongside this is a message of tolerance to racial and religious difference which they encounter at school, from their parents and in the media. The consequences of this

combination are that stories from the media, articulated within this landscape shaped by the totem of tolerance and plurality enter circulation 'and compete or coexist with other stories, such as those from religious traditions, that may be viewed as equally possible or plausible – or equally fictional' (ibid:228). Thus, the boundaries start to blur between beliefs formed by traditional religions and those which are circulating in popular culture, even if most teenagers are still able to draw the line between fantasy about the supernatural and the material world, or what they have learn about religion.

This research aims to add to the field of popular culture, religion and theology in the British context by exploring questions about meaning-making in relation to a particular popular and long-lived television programme, *Doctor Who.* It sought to do this by engaging with the programme through engagement with the reception of the programme. It does this in an interdisciplinary way, which sets out to take seriously the academic viewpoints of other disciplines. It works in such a way as to avoid, or at least minimise the pitfalls Lynch identifies; namely of approaching the audience reception work in such a way as it is loaded towards finding, 'theological' meaning-making. At the same time it remains open to the possibility that theology does have something worthwhile to contribute to the ongoing conversation around how people are finding ways to form their identities, understand the world around them and construct or discover meaning through popular culture in the context of the contemporary British world.

Cultural Studies

From the outset there are two main things to note about the study of popular culture from a Cultural Studies perspective. First, a lot of time is spent in this field attempting to define what is being studied. Storey (2009) begins by using the work of Tony Bennett (1980) to illustrate that as a concept 'popular culture is virtually useless, a melting pot of confused and contradictory meanings capable of misdirecting inquiry up any number of theoretical blind alleys' (Storey 2009a:1). This, of course, can be

discouraging for a practitioner from another discipline who wants to work using cultural studies with popular culture. Second, not only is 'popular culture' as a concept notoriously difficult to define, even when and if it is established, how best to undertake academic engagement with the object of study is also fiercely contested (Strinati 2004, Storey 2009a). During the development of Cultural Studies as a dedicated field of research in the post-war British academic context, several different methodologies have been used to examine popular culture, with a variety approaches being adopted from literature, literary criticism, history, psychoanalysis and sociology (Strinati 2004, Storey 2009a). As Strinati notes, there is sometimes a dissonance when trying to harmonise these varying disciplines because the way in which they seek to read, understand and theorise culture is divergent. Thus, although Cultural Studies seeks to be interdisciplinary, this is sometimes difficult to achieve (Strinati 2004).

What is not in doubt in the field of Cultural Studies is that modern mass media and popular culture do affect people's lives, especially in contemporary Western cultures, but increasingly across the globe (Strinati 2004). Therefore, it is crucial to try and understand how, and what this means. In order to do this those involved in undertaking the research have to find ways of mapping the area in which they are working, creating categories to work with as they explore it. A vital question, therefore, for this research arises as to how 'popular culture' is going to be defined and understood within its parameters. Strinati offers a definition of popular culture in his book which covers 'a set of generally available artefacts: films, records, clothes, TV programmes, modes of transport, etc' (Strinati 2004: xvi quoting Hebdige 1988). Storey meanwhile has a more nuanced definition, referencing the work of Raymond Williams he points out the way in which the terms 'culture' and 'popular' interact with the each other when they are used alongside each other.

> Williams (1983) suggests four current meanings: 'well-liked by many people'; 'inferior kinds of work'; 'work deliberately setting out to win favour with the people'; 'culture actually made by the people for themselves'. (Storey 2009a:5)

In discussing these four meanings for ‘popular culture’, Storey notes the implications of using each one. So, although to qualify as ‘popular’ there has to be a quantitative element, this is insufficient on its own to focus the object of study and begs questions, like at what figure quantitatively is something deemed to be popular and who decides? (Storey 2009a). Simply to make ‘popular culture’, however, those aspects of culture which do not belong to another cultural category like ‘high art’ or ‘folk art’ brings into a play a number of ideological considerations which have always been part of the debate surrounding ‘popular culture’; namely, questions of taste, and defining and locating ‘popular culture’, as something mass-produced, in opposition to ‘high art’ which in turn is seen as more creative and beyond the taint of commercialism. The boundary between ‘high’ and ‘popular’ culture is not as firm and fixed as this, for works which were once popular have become now classified as ‘high art’, such as Shakespeare and Dickens (Storey 2009a). Storey reminds his readers that popular culture is ‘not a historically fixed set of popular texts and practices’ and ‘nor is it a historically fixed conceptual category’ (Storey 2009a: 14). Those undertaking study need to remember that the object of their study ‘is both historically variable’ and that it will also be ‘in part constructed by the very act of theoretical engagement’ (ibid: 14). There are also further complications arising from the ‘different theoretical perspectives’ used by those studying popular culture (ibid: 14). The most common division is between the study of texts (popular fiction, television, pop music etc.) and lived cultures or practices (seaside holidays, youth subcultures, the celebration of Christmas, etc.). (Storey 2009a: 14)

One of the most useful theoretical tools from cultural studies for the purposes of this research, is the concept of the ‘circuit of culture’, which Richard Johnson articulates in his piece ‘What is cultural studies anyway?’ (Johnson 1986). As stated previously, both Gordon Lynch and Melanie Wright make mention of it in their case for the use of cultural studies in field of religion, theology and popular culture (Lynch 2009, Wright 2009). In trying to describe, develop and even perhaps reconcile the relationship between various approaches to the study of popular culture, Johnson noted that each one stood in a different place with object of their study and this, therefore, created a particular relationship; in other words each one viewed it from a specific perspective and this influenced what they 'saw' and how their relationship was defined.

> What if they are all true, but only as far as they go, true for those parts of the process which they have most clearly in view? What if they are all false or incomplete, liable to mislead, in that they are only partial, and therefore cannot grasp the process as a whole? What if attempts to 'stretch' this competence (without modifying the theory) lead to really gross and dangerous (ideological?) conclusions? (Johnson 1986:45)

Johnson created a diagram to illustrate the process involved in the production, circulation and consumption of popular culture (Johnson 1986: 46). He articulated what now seems obvious, but then was a revelation, that a whole picture of how a piece of popular culture functions and is received, used and understood needs to include every point on the circuit, because each individual point only has a partial perspective. Thus, Johnson was able to bring together perspectives which look at the power relations and commercial considerations involved in production, those which examine the circulation and content of a particular text or object and how it is received, used or understood. This is important in the context of this research because it provides an important aspect of the conceptual framework from which this study approaches and answer some of the strategic questions. This is that research on the reception of popular culture by audiences is a necessary and it is valid part of understanding how popular culture functions and is used.

Johnson is helpful because he also points out some of the limits of particular cultural studies approaches to popular culture from each perspective e.g. limiting the understanding of the use of a piece of popular culture from the circumstances of its production only (Johnson 1986:55).

> ...the relationships between production, consumption, regulation and so on are better understood not as linear or sequential but as interdependent, with each moment always implicated in the others...No moment in the cultural circuit is determinative for the others. (Wright 2009:108)

For the purposes of this study, his comments on the boundaries and differences between public and private moments in the circuit of culture are illuminating, as they indicate the complexity of attempting to comprehend what is taking place when a piece of popular culture is read, watched or interacted with, and where, when and how meaning is being conceived, conveyed and made or received in that process (Johnson 1986). Janice Radway makes a similar point concerning the complexity of this process when revisiting her own seminal work, *Reading the Romance* (Radway 2009). Her aim had been to move away from a theoretical model and engage with actual readers, but the process of actually doing this 'produced many surprises, not least of which was the realisation that even ethnographic description of the 'native's' point of view must be an interpretation...' (Radway 2009:202). It is worth quoting here Radway's own reflection on her work and the conclusion she reaches.

> I would therefore now want to agree with Angela McRobbie when she states flatly that 'representations are interpretations'. As she goes on to say, they can never be pure mirror images of some objective reality but exist always as the result of 'a whole set of selective devices, such as highlighting, editing, cutting, transcribing and inflection'. Consequently, I no longer feel that ethnographies of reading should *replace* textual interpretation completely because of their greater adequacy to the task of revealing an objective cultural reality. Rather, I think they should become an essential and necessary component of a multiply focused approach that attempts to do justice to the ways historical subjects understood and partially controlled their own behavior while recognizing at the same time that such behavior and self-understanding are limited if not in crucial ways complexly determined by the social formation within which those subjects find themselves. (Radway 2009:202)

In the context of this study, this affirms the necessity of remaining constantly aware of the pitfalls in undertaking qualitative research, such as constructing it in such a way as to 'find' what the researcher wants or expects to be present. The important contribution of Cultural Studies to this research is that as a discipline, it takes seriously the way in popular culture and its production, consumption and reception are all part of the process

of meaning-making in contemporary culture. It accords agency in this process to the audience, as well at to those who are creating and broadcasting television programmes. It is this point on the 'circuit of culture' which this research is concerned with and with which it seeks to engage.

Television studies

The first question that arises when embarking on the study of television is 'Why study television at all?' Robert C. Allen (1992) answers this question thus:

> For starters, because it's undeniably, unavoidably 'there'. And, it seems everywhere. What people do with television is a topic worth thinking about and studying because television enters into the everyday lives of so many different people in so many different places and in so many different ways
>
> (Allen 1992:1).

Of course, the world today is a much altered one in terms of broadcast media from the one which Allen was addressing twenty-five years ago. Now there are increased options for people to access their viewing via computer, mobile phones and other portal technology. Digital television has been rolled out across the United Kingdom and there are channels available via Freeview, cable and satellite dishes. Alongside this, the viewer can purchase box set DVDs of popular long-running series not just physically but through streaming services such as Netflix and NowTV, which allow them to view not just individual programmes which they have missed or wish to view, but whole series. Alongside this, there is the opportunity to access programming on demand and even the ability to pause live television broadcasts. All these things are changing the landscape of the televisual world, but rather than undermining Allen's observation that television is a daily part of people's lives all over the world and therefore, worthy of study, it intensifies it. Miller asserts that contrary to people's expectations, television viewing is actually increasing rather than decreasing, precisely because of the access new media devices and formats provide (Miller 2010).

> Consider NBC's 2008 numbers for its situation comedy *The Office* (not the UK original, but a remake): a typical episode had 15.5 million viewing on television,

> 6.9 million streaming and 37,000 downloading to computers, 33,000 watching on demand, and 37,000 peering at their cells (Miller 2010:144).

These changes, however, do complicate the second question which arises when studying television, 'What is television? John Fiske in his seminal book, *Television Culture* (1987), provides this framework for the study of television.

> … I work with the definition of television as a bearer/provoker of meanings and pleasures, and of culture as the generation and circulation of this variety of meanings and pleasures within society. Television-as-culture is a crucial part of the social dynamics by which the social structure maintains itself in a constant process of production and reproduction: meanings, popular pleasures, and their circulation are therefore part and parcel of this social structure. (Fiske 1987:1)

Though this is a more extreme contemporary example, Fiske's observation about television bearing and provoking meaning and pleasure, and as an important part of the social structure in the circulation of meaning, appears to be borne out by a report in 'The Times' on Saturday 11 June 2011, noting that the government in Iran was deeply concerned by the culture influence of the Iranian version of 'Come Dine with Me', a daytime Channel Four television programme, where four people compete for a prize of a £1,000 by hosting each other at dinner parties and judging the food and ambience of the evening. The home-produced version of this format has become very popular in Iran and the idea of women inviting unknown men in their home and not being veiled, alongside other aspects of the programme was seen to be bringing inappropriate Western cultural influences into the homes of Iran (Tomlinson 11 June 2011). While in the British context concern about the cultural influence of television may not encompass the same aspects of life as in Iran, nevertheless, it is still present is an awareness of its significant power and influence. Hence, an article in the Guardian on 13 November 2018 by Martin Balsam entitled, 'Is Doctor Who finally getting it right on race?' which discusses the programmes record on its portrayal of race. This question matters to the

writer because this well-known, lasting and popular television series is deemed to have power as a bearer and provoker of meaning.

That this medium of culture does connect with people is certain, but what Television Studies tries to establish is how this engagement and communication takes place. In order to do this, Television Studies has had to define its area of study. It has often accomplished this by distinguishing itself from other media like radio and film (Bignell 2004:3). This has been particularly important because 'cinema and broadcast TV are often taken to be interchangeable media', whereas they are different, both in terms of product, production and reception, and this has affected their developing aesthetics and narrative structure (Ellis 1992: 1). The obvious way in which television differs from radio is that it is an audio-visual medium, with pictures accompanying the story which is being told, whether that narrative is fact or fiction. This is something which, with the advent of new technology and news channels sometimes showing amateur footage of breaking events taken by people on their mobile phones begins to open up the interaction available between audiences and those producing programmes. The way in which television differs from film and is similar to radio is its textuality and its domestic setting; to watch a new film the audience usually has to gather in a specific place, a darkened cinema, at a particular time and watch together, collectively observing certain rules of etiquette. This is, at least in theory, unlike television watching which usually happens at home and may be done alone, with others or while doing something else like cooking dinner or ironing or reading the paper. Television, therefore, is constituted as a 'flow of audio-visual material' which while it is segmented into individual programmes, also continues 'without empty gaps in between' (Bignell 2004:4). This affects the way in which the viewer interacts with it because rather than choosing to go and see a particular film, the viewer is often 'drawn into and out of a flow of material that does not come to a decisive end' (Bignell 2004:4). While this may be less so, now that viewers can chose to stream specific shows, until that series is complete it is often the case that the service will automatically bring up the next episode, unless the provider had decided to limit access to a more traditional weekly release. Thus, the viewer is still involved in a flow of television. Alongside this, providers of content will often bring up selected suggested titles based on the viewer's previous choices and present

these with the choices other viewers have made who have watched the same programme or series.

Traditionally, television audiences could and frequently did have programmes on in the background, watching while they performed other domestic tasks; choosing the moment when they are going to focus their full attention on the television for a particular programme and aware of the scheduling of the series they liked and followed. People still channel hop from one programme to another, switching from news to entertainment to documentary and back, creating their own bricolage of programming, especially now there are far more channels available in the United Kingdom. Even very small children know and remember the number of the channels they like to watch and the sequence that programmes are scheduled, changing between channels to get their favourites. These are all things which television studies 'has tried to address' 'by looking not only at individual programmes but also the ways they link together' (Bignell 2004:4) This involves Television Studies in using such concepts as genre and scheduling, where programme makers may use the conventions of a particular type of programme to maintain audience interest or plan an evening's television viewing to include both variety and continuity to secure audience loyalty. This aspect of television studies has encouraged thought about how programmes are a product and the ways in which audiences are viewed and how television is used and enjoyed (Bignell 2004). For television studies it has been considered vital to 'comprehend, to capture, the audience' because they 'participate in the most global (but local), communal (yet individual and time-consuming practice of meaning-making in the history of the world' (Miller 2010:115). As with the academic study of film, popular culture and literature Television Studies includes practitioners who approach the subject from a number of different perspectives.

- analytical study of television programmes as texts
- the television industry as an institution and its production practices and organisation
- television in contemporary culture and the sociological study of the audiences

- television history and developments in broadcasting policy

(Bignell 2004: 2)

It is a necessary part of this research to be aware of all of these aspects of television studies, however, the most important one is the role of television as an expression of contemporary British culture and the reception of the *Doctor Who* in a specific era.

Though Television Studies has sought to define itself as separate from the study of film and radio, it has also borrowed from these fields to accomplish its work (Bignell 2004). It has 'used methodologies for describing and analysing television texts that come from disciplines including Film Studies', it has used 'methods of discussing audiences and television institutions that come from sociology', as well as recognising the importance of being aware of the contextual historical development of the medium (Bignell 2004:3). This bring us to a crucial point about television, that unlike film it is expressed everywhere as a local cultural product, 'television has no dominant global form' (Bignell 2004:4, Ellis 1992:5). British television does broadcast many programmes and series made in the USA and recently from elsewhere, and there are remakes and collaborations which are transatlantic. The essential character of our television traditions are very different, with a strong public service ethos here and more commercial one in the US (Bignell 2004:4). Within this context of difference, it is therefore vital to have some academic research in the field of religion, theology and popular culture which examines the British arena of television and does so by engaging with a genuinely popular, historically long-lived and recognisably British programme.

Science-fiction television and its audiences

In examining the nature of science fiction audiences in their book *Science Fiction Audiences: Watching Doctor Who and Star Trek* (1995), Tulloch and Jenkins highlight the way in which *Star Trek's* initial creator, Gene Rodenberry seemed to be working with two different ideas of the television audience. The first is 'the network's insistence on appealing to the lowest common denominator' and second, 'the producer's faith in

the existence of an intelligent and discriminating audience (Tulloch & Jenkins 1995:6). Neither of these is based on empirical data but provide a framework for the production process (ibid: 6). They also note, however, that while these are Rodenberry's remembrances after the event, his own statements at the time of production demonstrate 'a more complex and contradictory picture of the series' perceived audience' (ibid: 6).

> We will be competing with other television series for a mass audience on an adventure-drama-action basis. That audience will sit out there as ever, with a hand poised over the control knob, beer, potato chips and a dozen other distractions around them (quoted in ibid:7).

Yet, while wanting to emphasize the need to stay within the constraints of given television conventions and not stray too far into the then less familiar area of the science fiction genre, Rodenberry also says:

> This need not invite bad writing since science fiction (as all sf classics indicate) permits an enormous range of audiences – the child, the housewife, and the truck driver can enjoy the colourful peril of Amazons wielding swords (or even muscled romance) while, at the same time, the underlying comment on man and society can be equally interesting and entertaining to a college professor. (quoted in Tulloch and Jenkins 1995:7)

Rodenberry's competing, and sometimes conflicting, concepts of the audience for Star Trek open up a number of issues which are significant for this piece of research in terms the intended approach of examining the reception of episodes from an example of a genuinely popular example of science-fiction television programming aimed at a family audience. First, it highlights the competing aspects at play in relation to the audience with a programme like this. The need to gain and continue to grow a sizeable audience, coupled with the desire to produce something which also has content that is not appealing simply to the 'perceived' lowest common denominator; in other words, what the producers believe will attract and maintain the best audience figures including new

viewers, alongside producing something which has longevity and will work with the expectations of an existing, dedicated and vocal fan audience. When *Doctor Who* was recommissioned by the BBC as a flagship piece of drama for the Saturday evening schedule, these were aspects in the process which all will have come into play. Second, Rodenberry's comments hint at something which has become a major issue in the study not just of television but of popular culture, that of the relationship between text and audience in terms of meaning-making. Rather than working from theory, or the perception of a constructed 'ideal spectator 'inscribed' in the text', work with audience reception seeks to investigate 'the relation of an audience to the ideological operations of television' and this 'remains in principle an empirical question' (Morley 1980: 162). In his study, *The 'Nationwide' Audience* (1980), Morley sought to address the imbalance he saw in the dominant attitudes of the day, as advocated by the journal *Screen,* which gave the text and those who 'interpreted' it academically, far more power in the process of meaning-making than audiences to the point where they often almost disappeared from view (Tulloch & Jenkins 1995:67). Although much audience research followed, by the early 1990s it was starting to be observed that now, it was the text which was being side-lined in work on television. The question of the 'circuit of culture' arose in a different context and various academic players sought to articulate where they thought the emphasis should lie. Tulloch and Jenkins helpfully summarise the various viewpoints:

> ... Shaun Moores' comment in 1990 that the 'time has come to consolidate our theoretical and methodological advances by refusing to see texts, readers and contexts as separable elements by bringing together ethnographic studies with textual analysis', and also by Morley (1992) who argues that the 'power of the viewers to reinterpret meanings is hardly equivalent to the discursive power of centralized media institutions to construct the texts which the viewer then interprets; to imagine otherwise is simply foolish'. Ang (1990), too, notes that while audiences may be active, 'it would be utterly out of perspective to cheerfully equate 'active' with 'powerful'. (Tulloch & Jenkins 1995:68)

This is also commented on by Steve Bailey in *Media Audiences and Identity: Self-Construction in the Fan Experience* (2005). He also references Morley's discussion of the 'media effects' tradition and the 'uses and gratification' model in audience research (Bailey 2005). Is the audience to be given, as in the 'hypodermic needle (as it is commonly dubbed) model of reception' only an essentially passive role in its reception of media and its messages, or is the 'uses and gratifications' model to be used, which allows the audience far more power, agency and variety in their responses? (Bailey 2005:4) For Bailey, while the former has shortcomings, the latter works on the assumption of 'excessive freedom in the meaning-making process' failing to pay sufficient attention to 'social nature of meaning production' and based on a 'highly individualistic' 'understanding of media reception' (Bailey 2005:4). While Tulloch and Jenkins believe there should be a return to textual analysis, they also make use of audience research. Indeed, at about the same time as Morley's work on *Nationwide*, Tulloch was undertaking audience research on *Doctor Who.* This work lasted over a twelve-period but was mainly focussed in the period between 1979-84 and was based on groups chosen with reference to the programme's actual audience (Tulloch & Jenkins 1995:68).

Their empirical research on an earlier period of *Doctor Who* identified some useful things with regard to work with audiences which has been touched on earlier in the discussion of existing work on religion, theology and popular culture. Of particular importance is the recognition that those who make up television audiences are not homogenous and therefore:

> …it is not surprising that we get different readings from differently constituted audience groups, nor that we see a contestation of discourses *within* any one group (or even within one individual member of an audience group). (Tulloch and Jenkins 1995:108)

Furthermore, it can observed, within this multiplicity of readings, that the personal context and experience of audience members had an impact on their appreciation and interpretation of the programme. So, for those who were fans and followers of *Doctor Who* coming to an agreed collective interpretation of the episode was distinct part of their enjoyment. For other members of the audience what Tulloch and Jenkins name as a 'recognition of relevance' relating to the programme's perceived degree of realism was observable (Tulloch & Jenkins 1995).

> For example, many of our schoolgirl audience evaluated the text's degree of realism negatively compared with the 'real world' of soap opera (while others found it too real and 'scientific'); audiences of TV producers assessed its realism (and therefore their enjoyment) against their own professional competences in being able to spot continuity errors and other (minute) naturalistic details; mothers of pre-schoolers who watched *Doctor Who* with their children preferred to undercut the 'realism' of its monsters by telling the very young fans that these were 'only actors dressed up'; audiences of actors deplored the 'one-dimensional', 'unrealistic' acting and sets, but nevertheless enjoyed certain eras of *Doctor Who* for a 'quality acting style' of 'send up'. (ibid:109)

In preparing and conducting audience research this study has heard from a number of different disciplines that it will need to take seriously particular questions and issues. First, to allow the space for a multiplicity of readings to be articulated. Second, to reflect on who the people are who form the audience of *Doctor Who*. Finally, to be aware of the role of the researcher in the formation of meaning. (Tulloch & Jenkins 1995)

> Surveying his own analysis of the text and audiences in the *Nationwide* project, David Morley asked the question whether 'preferred meaning' is in fact a property of the *text*, or something generated from the text by the *analyst*, or the reading which the analyst predicts that most members of the *audience* will produce. We need to ask a similar question of ourselves: more than predict

> audience meanings, perhaps as interviewers we actually help them *produce* them? (Tulloch & Jenkins 1995:125)

Rather than seeing this as a negative thing, Tulloch and Jenkins go on to use it to open up discussion around the fact 'that all readings take place in contexts where some agents and agencies will have more power in determining interpretation than others' (ibid:125). They suggest that although audiences can determine the meaning or their reading of *Doctor Who*, there are also certain 'preferred meanings' which occur again and again, and which therefore offer limits to the audience's scope for reading the text. It is useful here to appreciate, in their own assessment, how this is characterised:

> ...that it is a programme of 'ideas' in contrast to the 'action/special effects of the *Star Wars*'; that the Doctor is a man of science and ingenuity with 'deep pockets', helping people against power-hungry, single-minded oppressors; that, as well, there is a 'different', 'eccentric' and 'idiotic' side to the Doctor which is inflected differently in different eras of the show, and which is interwoven textually with the changing representation of the female companions. Clearly, then, *Doctor Who* does have certain textual practices which limit reading and interpretation. (Tullock & Jenkins 1995:126)

Therefore, from the perspective of this research, is it possible to identify reoccurring 'preferred meanings', which may serve to limit the audience's reading of the text and meaning-making? Alongside this is an important point about fans and fan reading of programmes made by Gray (2003), who notes that 'intentionally or not, audience research often equals fan research' with other viewers who are 'anti-fans' or 'non-fans' 'ignored or assumed'; this is problematic because the reception of a programme by these viewers is just as valid a subject for research and will 'involve different viewing practices, different proximities from the text' (Gray 2003: 64) Thus, it is of consequence to this study to think about who is going to be questioned and/or interviewed and how that may affect the results which are elicited. Fans are used to talking about the expression of popular culture they follow, they may well be more

reflective and articulate than other members of the audience, even developing their own language (Hills 2002). The question must be asked and addressed, would working only with fans demonstrably limit the scope of this research and what it hopes to examine about the relationship between popular culture and theology and religion?

These concerns about text and audience can be seen surfacing in quite a different sort of research. Scott, Street and Inthorn (2011) have recently sought to examine the relationship between the uses of popular culture and political engagement among first-time voters, deliberately deciding to look at this question, not by examining the use and consumption of news media but of entertainment, in the form of television, music and video games (Scott et al 2011). Commenting on data collected in 1995 which found, '...a positive association between civic engagement and viewing social dramas, and a negative association between civic engagement and viewing science fiction', they argue, 'that what is required is not further statistical correlations but examination of the content and interpretation of popular culture' (Scott et al 2011:500).

Arguing from another academic discipline, and motivated by a different question, to examine the relationship between popular culture and political and civic engagement, they nevertheless articulate a similar approach; 'a need to look more closely at the content and interpretation of entertainment' because they want to examine 'whether, and if so how popular culture has the role ascribed to it' (Scott et al 2011: 501). For the purposes of this research it is has been useful to note the way in which they use and critique the earlier research of David Buckingham in this area, especially in terms of defining what is political. It highlights the necessity of establishing the parameters of research and the methodology used because it is not just what is said or written which matters but how it is analysed.

The place of *Doctor Who* in the contemporary world of cultural theory, popular culture and work on television

In this final section I begin by using an article, 'Doctor Who and the Convergence of Media: A Case Study in 'Transmedia Storytelling' (Perryman 2009) to locate *Doctor Who* within the contemporary cultural sphere. Neil Perryman seeks to demonstrate:

> ...how *Doctor Who* has become an unlikely template for the BBC's drama output and commissioning policies, and how a niche cult, aimed at a minority of hardcore fans, successfully transformed itself into a flagship franchise for mainstream practices that eschew passivity for participation and static simplicity for multi-platform complexity. This is the story of how *Doctor Who*, a programme ostensibly *about* the future, *became* the future. (Perryman 2009:473)

While issue may be taken with Perryman's last phrase, that *Doctor Who* is a programme about the future, in terms of this study his piece is essential because it reflects on the changing media and cultural milieu into which the new *Doctor Who* has returned and in which it has been produced and received. Alongside this, the inclusion of an article which particularly focuses on the recent reincarnation of *Doctor Who,* beside others by Richard Hoggart, Raymond Williams, John Fiske, Dick Hebdige to name only a few, in the fourth edition of John Storey's collection of work on cultural theory and popular culture, adds weight to the validity of selecting *Doctor Who* as an example of contemporary popular culture. As part of the more general cultural studies and cultural theory landscape Perryman's article, as well as highlighting the ways in which technological changes in the media may challenge or cause previous perceptions and frameworks of reference concerning production, text and audience to be reinterpreted, also draws attention to a number of the issues and tensions which have and still do exist in this area. Furthermore, the references and bibliography provided a wealth of material which will be of use for this study.

Perryman takes as his starting point a number of comments by BBC executives regarding the revolution in technology which has resulted in a strategy for BBC on-demand services. Mark Thompson, the Corporation's then Director General, has coined the phrase 'Martini Media', coming from the old Martini advertising strap line: 'anytime, anyplace, anywhere' (Perryman 2009: 472 &488). Michael Grade, the then Chairman of the BBC said in January 2006 with great prescience:

> On-demand is coming and it will change everything. The on-demand world will be one of infinite global choice, of unlimited access to the archives: whatever you want, whenever and wherever you want it (quoted in Perryman 2009:472).

Perryman first describes in detail the ways in which historically *Doctor Who* has always been a television series which elicited and existed with other means of 'storytelling' beyond the broadcast programme. He lists annuals, spin-off books, a long-play record, a radio series, comic strips and eventually a weekly magazine (Perryman 2009). He also notes however, that this does not mean that they count as 'early examples of multimedia narratives' and 'we would not refer to them as transmedia storytelling (Perryman 2009:474). This is because, according to Perryman, rather than being under the control of the BBC and in-line with their production ideals and storylines, what was produced frequently did not involve collaboration with the BBC. So, the 1967 annual contained a 'depiction of the Doctor' which 'had little in common with the televised character' not just 'in terms of his appearance' but 'also his personality' (ibid: 474). In fact, many of the things which were shown were in direct contrast to the Doctor as characterised on television, so that 'he inexplicably sported a Batman-esque utility belt', 'displayed a barely disguised contempt for his companions' and an 'unsettling bloodlust towards his enemies' (ibid: 474). Perryman ends by commenting 'that the majority of fans now feel that these ancillary additions to the franchise enjoy little or no legitimacy in terms of canonicity, or to put it bluntly, they don't count' and he ends by noting two places where the reader can go for a more detailed debate on what constitutes canonicity in *Doctor Who* (Perryman 2009:474). This shows that multimedia strands to *Doctor Who* the broadcast programme have always existed, even when they were not produced

or directly controlled by the BBC, but it seems that it is the fans themselves who have created criteria by which these are mostly deemed now to be 'non-canonical', even though there must have been market for them at the time which meant it was economically viable to produce them. The BBC's relationship to multi-media strands altered after the programme was cancelled in 1989. In 1990 it licensed *Doctor Who* to Virgin Publishing and the first original novel was produced in 1991. Unlike their predecessors these New Adventures (NAs) were not aimed at children but at adults (Perryman 2009:474).

> ...what really set these novels apart from other examples of tie-in merchandising that could be found in franchises like *Star Trek* or *Star Wars*, was the fact that Virgin Publishing operated an open submissions policy. This meant that fans could submit story proposals regardless of their experience (or lack of) in professional publishing and *anyone* could potentially contribute to the official *Doctor Who* mythos (Perryman 2009:475).

Perryman also describes a level of collaboration between the authors which had not previously existed, as they were loosely linked in a network which became more and more viable due to the internet and email but also included face to face meetings like the one at the Fitzroy Tavern in London (Perryman 2009:475).

> In short, they began to create a cohesive fictional world, something the producers of the television show had almost always failed to achieve (Perryman 2009:475).

So, while the broadcast programme *Doctor Who* may have been cancelled and off-air from 1989, when it returned in 2005 it was far more alive than it seemed to the many people outside the world of the dedicated fans (Perryman 2009:476). In the years after the first books, the BBC, encouraged by their financial success, had allowed other material such as audio dramas on CD to be made. These were created and produced through and independent company, Big Finish, set up in 1999. This company was

'staffed (administratively and creatively) by *Doctor Who* fans' (ibid: 475). Then in the early years of this century as it was developing its web content, the BBC produced a couple of webcasts, one of which included a brand new doctor in Richard E.Grant (Perryman 2009).

Perryman's detailed history of *Doctor Who* demonstrates yet again that an audience is not homogeneous. It is created from individuals who will have different contexts, different things they bring to the viewing and different things they take away from it, different levels of commitment to the programme from casual viewer through to dedicated fan who is willing to participate in keeping the 'storytelling' alive. When it was a vital part of the BBC's Saturday night line-up, *Doctor Who* drew an audience of between 12-14 million (Perryman 2009:474). Clearly only a small percentage of these viewers became involved in creating material in the period between its cancellation and reincarnation. A significant proportion, however, were interested in the extra content created and sufficient in number to make it worthwhile economically for the BBC to licence and take an interest in it. Not everyone was happy with the way in which the BBC operated, 'some fans felt that the submission guidelines for the NAs were too restrictive' because 'you couldn't regenerate the Doctor, kill a companion or feature classic enemies such as the Daleks' and this was seen 'as an attempt by the BBC to police fan fiction by controlling the flow of content' (Perryman 2009:475).

Perryman opens up a crucial area in contemporary cultural studies: the question of where the power and meaning-making is situated in the production of the text and in its use in the creation of meaning. He does this by identifying both the way in which the first tranche of multimedia material was decided to be non-canonical by fans, by virtue of failing to keep to the essential character of the Doctor in the original television series and by recognising that following the cancellation of the programme, fans, licensed by the BBC, kept *Doctor Who* alive in the intervening years within a boundaried formula but still with the possibility of experimentation. Clearly in this instance, the lines between production, text and reception, had become blurred, as fans produce stories, administer the process and read, listen to or watch the results. In the period between *Doctor Who* being axed and returning to the television screens, it would appear the first

of these concerns was definitely answered by interaction between the people interested in *Doctor Who* continuing in some form and the producers. For the purposes of this study however, it is the concept of 'transmedia storytelling' which Perryman uses in his article, which is interesting and how that relationship was redefined when the series returned to broadcast television in 2005.

> Central to Jenkin's definition of transmedia storytelling (2003, 2006:96) is the suggestion that consumers who actively engage with a franchise that flows across different platforms can potentially enjoy 'new levels of insight and (an) experience (that) refreshes the franchise and sustains consumer loyalty' (quoted in Perryman 2009:477).

Perryman makes use of a quote from Russell T. Davies, the executive producer and main writer for the new *Doctor Who,* 'This show is now owned by the fans' (Perryman 2009:476). Whilst it is the case that there was plenty of scope for the audience to interact across a number of different media platforms after the resurrection of the Doctor, Perryman also includes another quote from Russell T. Davies that seems to demonstrate the conflict at the heart of Strinati's second concern for popular culture, identifying the tension between 'profitability and marketability' and 'quality, artistry, integrity and intellectual challenge' (Strinati 2004:3). It appears that Russell T. Davies himself is well aware of the inherent tensions of working with fans' expectations and seeking to attract and engage a wider audience for the new *Doctor Who.*

> Right from the start I wanted *Doctor Who* to have a genuine simplicity. And I've seen too many sci-fi story arcs disappear up their own back-reference, forcing the audience into the groves of the cult, far away from the glittering lights of primetime. And yet, and yet, and yet...Couldn't there be *something* for the faithful viewer? Some reward for staying all 13 weeks?
> (Russell T. Davies quoted in Perryman 2009: 477)

Transmedia storytelling provided a means by which those who wished to could engage in a wider horizon, with forums on the internet, the *Doctor Who Confidential* strand and speculation about the recurring 'Bad Wolf' as a phrase in Series One. Though this turned out to be something of an anti-climax when its meaning was revealed, the idea was used again in later series because the level of interest 'did demonstrate to the production team that both hard-core fans and a mainstream audience had enjoyed engaging in the hype that it generated...' (Perryman 2009:479). Now it is not simply the dedicated fans who want to participate in the transmedia storytelling but others too. It seems, however, that the balance of power has tipped back towards the producers, who now number among themselves *Doctor Who* fans.

> The production team also took perverse pleasure in diverting fans into intertextual cul-de-sacs with clues to mysteries which never really existed. (Perryman 2009:479)

This demonstrates that questions about the ideological role of popular culture and resistant readings need to be differently framed and understood; binary oppositions of 'high' and 'low' culture, 'top-down' or 'bottom-up' popular culture, financial and economic success vs creativity and quality are too simplistic for a contemporary approach to popular culture, where popularity, value and meaning are formed in process of negotiated engagement and where both the producer and the audience can make use of multi-platform interaction with the text.

While Perryman's article concentrates on the new *Doctor Who* in relation to transmedia storytelling, Matt Hills in '*Triumph of the Time Lord: Regenerating Doctor Who in the Twenty-First Century'* (2010) has a wider scope. His 'aim' is 'to analyse BBC Wales' *Doctor Who* through the lenses of media and cultural theory' (Hills 2010:12). There is no doubt that in terms of locating this study in contemporary cultural and media theory and because of its extensive bibliographical material, Hill's book remains an excellent resource. Hills locates himself as a 'scholar-fan', who wants to bring both those aspects of himself, his academic knowledge and intellectual thought, and his pleasure in *Doctor*

Who, to bear when he examines and reflects upon the newly 'regenerated' programme (Hills 2010). He makes the point that only a couple of years prior to the new *Doctor Who* appearing it was still dismissed in some academic quarters, quoting the following from Piers Britton and Simon J. Barker:

> *Doctor Who*...remains beyond the critical pale: scholarly treatments such as John Tulloch's...study of audience responses...belong to that class of book that are the target of journalists' ongoing scorn for cultural studies as a discipline. *Doctor Who* can make no sustainable claim to possessing intellectual respectability (quoted in Hills 2010:2).

Yet now, only a few more years on *Doctor Who* has become one of the most written about 'cult' television programmes, including in academic writing; indeed this is occurring to such as extent that he quotes one writer who foresees *Doctor Who* conferences and another who predicts the beginning of *Doctor Who* studies (Hills 2010). While the *Doctor Who* studies have not yet materialised, during the course of this research the available academic literature on *Doctor Who* has grown and developed enormously. Thus, this research project has become one which is located in a plethora of interest in the new *Doctor Who.* An interest which is represented by the number of articles and collections of essays to be found which are linked to the series, such as, Di Paolo's 'Political Satire and British American Relations in Five Decades of Doctor Who' (2010) or Hobden's 'History meets Fiction in Doctor Who, '*The Fires of Pompeii*: A BBC Reception of Ancient Rome on screen and online*'* (2009). Hill's references a point in James Chapman's book *Inside the TARDIS* (2006), where Chapman says that popular culture can be taken seriously without recourse to the use of cultural theory. On this point Hills disagrees, he believes the use of cultural theory can open up the programme and even add something towards understanding it.

> Scholar-fandom means bringing together different ways of interpreting *Doctor Who.* Whereas fans generally display a tendency to read the series intratextually

> – in relation to itself and its own histories – academics frequently read it intertextually via specific theoretical frameworks (Hills 2010:4).

For Hills, bringing together these two approaches, from fandom and academe, into dialogue means that certain shortfalls on both sides can be addressed. Thus, the fans tendency to want to identify a 'perfect' Doctor or production period, to categorise what is 'proper' and 'authentic' and what is not, can be sidestepped via an academic study which is not interested in ascribing these things.

> Unlike fandom, media theory is anti-essentialist. Shattering one's Platonic template means refusing the idea that *Doctor Who* cannot, or should not, do comedy, soap opera, sentimentality, camp, nostalgia, crime fiction, the puerile, the political, or the romantic... Oddly enough, taking a few cues from media theory might allow a more appreciative approach to *Doctor Who* than sometimes occurs within fandom (Hills 2010:8).

From Hills' perspective what the fans have to offer to academics is their sense of anticipation about an new episode and the way in which it is dealt with as something which belongs to a much wider production history. He claims that Television Studies goes wrong when it treats programmes as discrete objects, rather like the pages of a book between a cover which are fixed and contained. Like Perryman, he notes that *Doctor Who* is now part of a much larger process of multi-platform production; former fans have now become the producers of the text, so there is a complex interplay going on between production and reception which has to be managed (Hills 2010). Hills coins the phrase 'Fans as Textual Poachers Turned Gamekeepers' to describe them. He writes about the lengths the production team have gone to maintain secrecy about the programme content, especially climactic series endings. There is an evident tension between the fans' desire to have foreknowledge of the programmes and the production team's desire to keep it under wraps until the moment of broadcast in order to maintain its power to touch and move audiences (Hills 2010). For the purposes of this research Hills offers a timely and significant reminder that for the viewers of *Doctor Who*, both

fans and others (an interesting binary which Hills also comments on), the programme is created and constructed to be something which engages them both visually and emotionally.

Hills (2010) goes on to look at the new *Doctor Who* from a number of perspectives. He identifies a 'Russell T. Davies Era', examines genre and the development of the *Doctor Who* format, the importance of Murray Gold's music in mainstreaming the programme and the place of the new *Doctor Who* in the debate about quality television. He also does some interesting textual analysis of the programmes, examining the concept of the 'good' and 'bad' fan which he sees as deliberately included within the text of the programmes (Hills 2010). Hills also comments on the way in which the new *Doctor Who* has adopted some of the characteristics of 'cult' television and the associated fandom to identify itself; these include the 'transmedia storytelling' already discussed above in the Perryman article, the way in which it desires to be 'high-concept' television, its use of narrative as 'special effect' and 'technobabble' (the deliberate employment of nonsensical technical language for effect) (Hills 2010: 218-225). Hills' work demonstrates the multi-layered nature of the *Doctor Who* programmes and the way in which it keys into a number of significant debates in the current study of television. It also indicates the sheer volume of written material available on the new *Doctor Who*, with which this research had necessarily to engage and which continued to be produced during the course of this study, as will be seen when the data analysis chapters are reached.

Concluding reflection

This first chapter has sought to outline the space which currently exists for research from a theological and religious perspective on popular culture, particularly in the British academic context, on television. To date, whilst there has been work on film, and more recently music, by academics engaging with popular culture, there is has been little substantial literature on television until recently with Callaway and Batali's *Watching TV Religiously: Television and Theology in Dialogue* (2016). They make the

point that ‘a book about television is surely a day late and a dollar short’ and then make great progress in taking television seriously as a partner for theological engagement, Callaway and Batali 2016:4). They also argue for the continuing significance of television despite the changing media landscape and are therefore desirous of make a connection between television viewing and the presence of God in the world. They acknowledge that what they are doing, in ‘celebrating an overwhelmingly populist (and fiercely popular) medium like TV is not incredibly common’ (ibid:7) but that this is a significant oversight because ‘outside of working, sleeping and eating, watching television is *the* primary occupation of most Americans’ (ibid:10). Furthermore, they note that television ‘does not simply ‘reflect’ or ‘affect’ culture’, it is also ‘culture creating’ (ibid:11). In the British context the continuing dominance of television as medium for reflecting, affecting and creating culture was affirmed when the Independent newspaper reported on 24 May 2018 from a research survey which had found the average person in the country spends approximately twenty-seven hours per week watching television equating to between three and half and four hours of viewing per day. For television to be overlooked or ignored by theology is therefore, a significant omission, for an expression of popular culture which is still demonstrably an important part of people’s daily lives. So, while other new media, especially the internet, are gaining attention (see Campbell 2010), television seems to have been overlooked from a theology and religion point of view. This research offers perhaps the first UK-based in-depth study of television from a theological perspective. It differs from the work of Callaway and Batali, in that it uses empirical research to engage with television, seeking to discover, analyse, and reflect on viewers’ responses to the programmes they have seen and in turn, explore what this means for theology.

As a genuinely popular cultural product, earning its ‘first ever UK number one weekly TV rating’, the recently regenerated *Doctor Who* provides a good example of a television programme which has a history in British culture, a strong fan base and now mainstream audience appeal (Hills 2010:209). This is a crucial factor for this research, because one of the criticisms of current research in the field of popular culture, theology and religion is that it lacks empirical work to support its theoretical claims for the role of theology and religion in contemporary meaning-making. This research will endeavour to undertake such empirical work and to do so in such a way as to engage

with one of the other critiques of the academic study of popular culture from a theology and religion perspective; namely, that is insufficiently willing to embrace tools from other academic disciplines. The result of this is that it looks at popular culture through blinkers and consequently 'sees' in popular culture what is has already decided is on the horizon, because its field of vision is not wide enough nor does it have enough depth of focus.

The pertinent question in this study of television then becomes about the process by which meaning is made, perceived, understood and used, if at all. Callum Brown's theory is that it is the foundational 'discursive function' of Christianity has been and is still being eroded in Britain and this is both the cause and effect of that continuing decline (Brown 2001:14). This research adds to the field of study of popular culture, theology and religion by engaging with questions about meaning-making and the cultural milieu in which it takes place. It takes on board earlier critiques, learns from them and develops a method of working which both takes popular culture, in this case television, seriously, and undertakes its task in an inter-disciplinary manner. It argues that an understanding of the 'signs of the times' (Ward 2005) is central to the theological task; further that the study of the reception of television adds to the knowledge available to theologians about the cultural context in which they are living and working, and which they are seeking to engage and address.

Chapter 2: Methodology

In this methodological chapter I will do three things. First, I will describe the empirical aspect of this research, how it was designed, why different choices were made and what took place. Second, I will reflect on these practical parts of what happened in collecting the empirical data. Finally, I will describe the data analysis process, reflecting on what was learnt from the experience. By the end of the chapter the reader should have an understanding of both the research design, the factors which influenced it, including the practicalities which were encountered and what was learnt from undertaking the empirical aspect of the study.

Research Design

Focus: *Doctor Who*

The reasons *Doctor Who* was chosen as the focus for this research study can be stated succinctly. It is a genuinely 'popular' piece of modern television culture in terms of its viewing figures. It is an award-winning programme which as Hills notes has become part of 'public discourse' (Hills 2010: 226). It sets out to be a television programme which is appealing both to its fans and to a wider audience base (Davies 2010). It adopts deliberately narrative techniques and high-quality visual effects which have been demonstrated to work well with audiences on other programmes e.g. Buffy the Vampire Slayer (Davies 2010, Hills 2010). The specific era was chosen, when Russell T. Davies was in charge of production and contributed as a writer, because taken as whole these programmes sought to present, during prime-time Saturday night viewing suitable for a family audience, an identifiable world-view and explore important questions about life and experience within in it.

Method of Data Collection

Qualitative research methods were chosen as the most appropriate to use for this research because they aim to explore the social world in a way which appreciates

context, complexity and depth (Mason 2002:1). Research on audience reception in media, television, cultural studies and the study of popular culture and religion and theology, have made use of qualitative methods such as group interviews or focus groups, individual or family interviews and respondents' letters to generate data which is deeper and richer in nature than that which can be gleaned from a purely quantitative approach (Ang 1985, Morley 1980, Hoover 2006, Tulloch and Jenkins 1995). As this earlier work has demonstrated, using qualitative research methods allows the particular research questions to be explored with participants in such a way as to generate data with flexibility, investigating further as responses are made so as to elicit the richest possible material.

The main concern of this research is the way in which people engage with and may make use of a piece of popular culture in their own self-identity, meaning-making and values, with reference to the significance of responses by a variety of people, both fans, regular viewers and those who had not watched the *Doctor* Who before to what they had watched. As was noted earlier much audience research has focussed solely on fans. There is nothing inherently wrong with this, but it does mean that the views represented and any meaning-making which can be observed taking place, is firmly situated within a specific constituency of viewer defined by their status as a fan. This research sets out to test and understand the way in which popular culture is understood by viewers and what the significance of the conclusions are for contemporary theology; therefore, it was decided that it would be more fruitful to include a wide range of participants. More will be said about the method use for the data analysis later, however, it is important to note here that it was established early on in the process of the research design to draw on grounded theory approaches to the analysis of the qualitative data which was produced. Although the method was adapted somewhat to suit the particular circumstances of this research study. A grounded theory approach to generating and analysing the qualitative data collected was chosen for a particular reason; it is a method which specifically looks to generate theory from data and does not begin with a hypothesis which it is looking to prove or disprove. Producing and analysing the data without pre-conceived categories was and remains a crucial aspect of this research. This is because, as described in the first chapter, there has been much criticism of previous work in the area of the relationship between theology, religion and popular culture on

the grounds that those coming from a theological perspective have a deeply ingrained tendency to interpret material in a way which 'finds' what they are looking for or have decided is there. Using grounded theory does not, of course, remove the possibility for the researcher to bring their own 'conceptual baggage' to the data, but it does necessitate coding and then categorising the data according to what is contained within it, rather than using pre-existing ones (Robson 2011). More will be said later outlining grounded theory and how it was used in this study but it is important to be aware that its use became foundational to the research design.

After investigating the different possible ways of generating the empirical data, it was decided that the most helpful and appropriate method of data collection for this study was the use of panel group discussions. These would take place following the screening of two *Doctor Who* episodes chosen from the seasons which had been stipulated in the initial research proposal (Series 2-4 and specials 2005-2010). This method was chosen after considering other forms of audience created data which media scholars have used (such as Ang's use of respondents' letters in her study *Watching Dallas* (Ang 1985) or interviewing families in their own homes (Hoover 2006). In conducting research on television audiences both Morley (1980) in his ground-breaking study of the *Nationwide Audience* and Tulloch and Jenkins (1995) in their research on *Doctor Who* audiences made use of group interviews. These researchers used group interviews because they created spaces in which the audience could 'speak' and articulate their reactions to programmes. It also meant that their responses could be probed further in the 'live' context of the group interview. For the purposes of this research it was deemed more productive to follow this method of generating empirical data; creating a space in which the researcher could interact with the participants, recording their responses and adapting within the circumstances of the discussion to maximise the potential to address the particular research focus. It was noted Morley chose his audience groups to investigate the ways that people's social group affiliation affected their response to *Nationwide* and the 'common-sense' world view it portrayed (Morley 1980); while Tulloch and Jenkins (1995) deliberately chose groups who formed part of the core categories of the audience for *Doctor Who,* namely male university students, young people and parents, as well as television producers and actors, because they wanted to examine how people negotiated the meaning of the text within different groups and

compare those groups. This demonstrated the way in which the design of previous research and how participants were chosen in past studies had a direct relationship to the focus of the study. It affirmed the choice here not only to recruit and work with existing fans of *Doctor Who*, but to offer the invitation in recruiting participants to those who were not regular viewers or indeed, had not seen the programme before. This would allow for the widest possible set of responses so that the resulting data would not simply be based on the responses of fans. This was vital because the research focus was broader than wanting to understand what fans alone did in their engagement with a piece of popular culture.

There was, however, one important choice made about the nature of the panel discussion groups. In the United States, Hoover's work on theology, religion and media focussed on the use of media within Christian homes. In contrast, this research chose not to focus on Christian audience members alone and their responses to *Doctor Who,* nor on studying the respondents in a domestic setting (Hoover 2006). It did, however, make the chose to recruit predominantly Christian and non-Christian panel discussion groups. The groups, therefore, were recruited in such a way as to enable an exploration of the differences between the responses of Christian and non-Christian viewers (including people who are affiliated to other faiths and people who express no faith affiliation). There were four panel group discussions in total; two groups were recruited in such a way as to ensure that they were constituted from a majority of participants who did not express an explicit affiliation to the Christian faith, the other two groups were recruited in such a way as to be made up of a majority of participants who did express an affiliation to the Christian faith.

From the practical perspective of facilitating the panel group discussions Hoover (2006) was very helpful because he notes, concerning his study, that those who interviewed the families taking part often found that they had to find ways to keep returning to the same questions, asking them a little differently each time to elicit a response. The family's attitude to their media and television use, as they did this, would be articulated and expressed, often revealing things which were in some way contrary to their initial statements about hours of television or type of programmes watched (Hoover 2006). In

this study this approach of finding alternative ways to phrase questions to generate the data and elicit responses in the panel group discussions was also necessary. It provided focus (because there were questions on the programme the participants had just watched to stimulate discussion) and flexibility (because the responses of the participants were also given space to shape the discussion) (Bryman 2012). The panel discussion group facilitated by the researcher also provided a space in which the participants were able to listen to each other and, in hearing each other's responses, adapt, confirm or disagree with each other's positions. The design of the study, therefore, took account of the understanding that responses to a television programme are not simply made by individuals, but are part of more complex cultural and social interactions and negotiations, to which people bring their existing life-experience, worldview and beliefs and in which meaning is often negotiated alongside others. The group interviews took place after a screening of two chosen *Doctor Who* episodes (*Gridlock* and *Fires of Pompeii*). Although this was in many ways an artificial set of circumstances, as opposed to sitting at home on the sofa watching a programme, it meant that the participants had all seen the same episodes just prior to the discussion and it was fresh in their minds.

The number of group interviews was of necessity small when measured against previous studies which used this method (Morley 1980 and Tulloch and Jenkins 1995). By having four groups, two predominantly Christian and two predominantly of a non-Christian religious affiliation with eight to ten participants in each, it was recognised both sufficient data could be generated to engage with the research questions and the data-set would remain of a size which it was possible for one person to process. It allowed for the screening of the programmes and the group interviews to be done twice with each predominating group format, meaning it was possible to compare the responses between the Christian and non-Christian groups, and between the two Christian and two non-Christian groups. This created the space to acknowledge that the parallel groups of predominantly Christian participants and predominantly non-Christian participants could generate differing responses to what has been viewed and consequently, differing data.

Data Collection: Panel Group Discussions

The data for this research was then generated and collected via four semi-structured panel group discussions following the screening of two episodes of *Doctor Who* from the era on which the research was focussing. Group discussions, it was recognised are not without their potential problems; transcribing the data it was noted can be time-consuming and difficult if more than one person is speaking at once or the sound is inaudible, they can sometimes be hard to organise and recruited participants are not always reliable and the group dynamic may encourage people to 'express culturally expected views' (Bryman 2012:518). They still appeared, however, to be the best way of generating a set of data with which to engage with research questions posed concerning how people engage with, experience and understand a particular expression of popular culture and exploring what meaning-making potential it had for them. This was because this process of meaning-making is usually something which happens collectively, with people having to negotiate with others and with the public discourses around them, to come to an interpretation of what they have seen.

The group interviews were organised around screenings of episodes of *Doctor Who.* There were four screenings of two *Doctor Who* episodes (*Gridlock* and *The Fires of Pompeii)* from the given period (2005-2010) which were organised to take place with an audience of between eight to ten participants. After each screening the participants then took part in a panel group discussion on the episodes watched, facilitated by the researcher. Having the conversation as part of a group of individuals who have only just met for research purposes is artificial, when compared to the ordinary viewing experience within a domestic context and often among family and friends (Hoover 2006). As stated earlier, however, it is a recognised means in audience reception studies of eliciting data about from the audience (Morley 1980 and Tulloch and Jenkins 1995). It provided a boundaried space, in which engagement with the specific episodes viewed is the clear purpose of what is happening and it facilitates discussion happening in a semi-structured way.

In order to practise the management of the group dynamics a pilot event was undertaken in which a group of people were recruited from the work environment of the researcher. This group was then able to give me feedback on what has happened, in order that the questions for the panel discussion group could be practised and honed. Using group interviews also meant that a wider spectrum of people was able to participate, than for example with a series of one-to-one interviews and thus it was possible to for a greater breadth of data to be collected within the time-scale available. It was estimated that recruiting four groups of between eight to ten participants would create data from between thirty-two to forty participants. At the end of each screening, before the discussion, each person taking part was asked to fill out a short personal details form, including information regarding age, gender, ethnicity, religious affiliation or none and previous experience of watching Doctor Who.

Recruitment of participants and data collection

It was proposed to hold the screenings in various geographical locations. These included the University of Leicester; a venue in Wandsworth (possibly University of Roehampton or a hall on the Roehampton estate), the Cambridge Theological Federation, (specifically at Wesley House the Methodist training college), and a church-based Christian youth group in Edmonton, London. The choice of these four venues and groups was based on a number of considerations. The different geographical locations allow for the possibility of recruiting a variety of participants from various cultural, social and religious backgrounds. At the University of Leicester and in the Borough of Wandsworth it was hoped to recruit people who are not specifically of a Christian faith background by their own self-definition and declaration. In order to ensure this happened, the people who contacted the researcher to volunteer were asked if they considered themselves to be Christian or not. While Christians would not necessarily be excluded, I wanted to ensure that the groups in these venues contained a majority of participants who do not describe themselves as Christian so that the comparison between Christian and non-Christian responses could take place. The Cambridge Theological Federation and the London-based youth group were settings where the participants were highly likely, although not exclusively, to be Christian. As

with the other two interview groups in Leicester and Roehampton, the participants were asked about their religious affiliation beforehand, to ensure that these groups were predominantly Christian but again, participants from other faiths or none will not be excluded de facto.

Participants were offered a small payment in recompense for their time and eight to ten participants were recruited for each screening. It was recognised that if everyone arrived this would be quite a large group for the discussion, but this size of initial recruitment did foresee that one or two people might not arrive on the day as often happens (Bryman 2012). The people taking part were recruited by electronic media (in Leicester using the weekly University mailing system and the equivalent in Cambridge). In Wandsworth I had envisaged having to explore what possibilities there were for recruitment via local organisations such as the University of Roehampton or South Thames College, however, as will be seen later this became unnecessary.

The advertising for participants included brief contact details and those who were interested were asked to make initial contact by email by a specific date in order that the various applicants could be looked at and allocated to prior to the screening. When an interest was shown and I was contacted, I responded with a brief outline of the purpose of the research, what was involved in participating and the conditions for the fee payment. Issues surrounding confidentiality and anonymity were also explained. I prepared short documents which were emailed to prospective participants so that they could read them and contact me if they had any further questions. I also needed to ascertain whether prospective participants express an affiliation to the Christian faith or not for the purposes of ensuring the various interview groups contained sufficient participants to allow for the comparison between Christians and non-Christians. No further details were taken at this stage to avoid bias in the handling of the group during discussion.

The process for the young people's group in Edmonton was different. Recruitment was done via their Youth Worker. For those wishing to participate who were under-18, appropriate parental consent was sought, and the screening involved the researcher, who had an appropriate check for safeguarding purposes and the Youth Worker, who also had the necessary safeguarding requirements in place as part of their work. A lower age limit of 15 years old was set, but those volunteering to participate still needed to be able reflect on the questions being asked and take part in the group. It was also ensured that the material which was viewed fell within what was appropriate for the age-group involved. I explained, in person, beforehand, the issues around confidentiality and anonymity. On a practical point, a licence had to be obtained to show the episodes outside the University of Leicester, where their use was covered by the university. The researcher was advised that it was necessary to get a license personally to legally show the episodes at Wesley House and at the church in North London, so that copyright legislation was adhered regarding the showing of television programmes beyond a domestic setting.

Doctor Who episodes used, format for screenings and discussion

The chosen episodes used for the screening were from the second and third series respectively of the revived *Doctor Who*; they were 3:3 *Gridlock* by Russell T Davies and 4:3 *The Fires of Pompeii* by James Moran. Both episodes were shown to each group which had been recruited, so the same process happened in four instances. These episodes were chosen because they have different writers, including the series producer, Russell T. Davies and different settings, being set in far future (*Gridlock*) and the historical past *(The Fires of Pompeii)*. This means that both episodes are good exemplars of the science-fiction, time-travelling genre of which *Doctor Who* is part. They also provide a strong contrast with each other and their non-contemporary, non-earth bound time-frame and setting provide a distinctly different milieu for engagement and meaning-making. They have also been chosen because they include material which can be labelled as explicitly or implicitly religious (e.g. in *Gridlock* the use of the hymn *The Old Rugged Cross,* in the *Fires of Pompeii* the role of ancient religion as an aspect of the story and the Doctor and Donna, his assistant of the moment, becoming the

household Gods of the Roman family they save at the end of the episode). While the chosen episodes are part of the overarching series narrative, they are understandable as discrete, stand-alone stories. This means that those taking part do not need to have seen earlier episodes to grasp what is happening in the particular episode, although clearly those who have watched these episodes or the new *Doctor Who* before will come to them with a previous knowledge.

In the end, two screenings were held in Leicester, in a room at the Embrace Arts Centre which is part of the University of Leicester. The building is centrally located to much of the university campus and provided a large enough space with the relevant equipment for the screenings. It also enabled the Finance Officer to attend in person to sort out the details necessary for the payments to be made. This turned out to be more complicated than expected, as after advice was received, each person had to be registered through the University's employment bureau. The screening in Cambridge was held in the Common Room of the Methodist Theological College, which again had the necessary space and relevant equipment. On this occasion I sorted out the paperwork as people arrived. The final screening was held in a room at a Methodist Church in North London with the appropriate space and equipment.

At the start of each screening I gave a short synopsis of the research focus, taking care not to intimate any preferred responses. I also went over the format and expectations for what would take place, plus reiterating the information regarding confidentiality, anonymity and use of data. The participants were then asked to sign a form (a copy of which they had received as part of the recruitment process) saying they had understood these things and were willing to take part on these terms. Following the viewing, as stated above, each participant was asked to fill in a short questionnaire eliciting some quantitative information regarding age, gender, religious adherence or none and their previous viewing relationship with *Doctor Who.* I then facilitated the discussion, using some pre-determined questions to start and stimulate conversation within the group. Attention was paid to the managing the interactions within the group with appropriate interventions, (such as asking if people were in agreement with a particular point of view or comment) to try and avoid it becoming dominated by the more the vocal and

confident participants. The discussion was recorded using audio-recording equipment via a small computer. After the event I made any further notes and observations that needed to be recorded and kept for future reference. Given that the episodes lasted forty-five minutes, the discussion took approximately an hour and there was gathering and preparation time beforehand and closing and leaving at the end, each session took approximately three hours.

Reflections on the empirical data collection

At the beginning of this research I had not undertaken empirical data collection before. The whole process was new to me, and it is fair to say it was both exciting and interesting in its potential and challenging and daunting in its realisation. From a practical point of view there were several things which were experienced from which I learnt, and which, should I engage in this type of data collection again would feed into, and in some cases alter, how I would design and do the research. The first, concerns the audio-recording of the panel group discussions and directly relates to what will come next in the data analysis section. The recording was made via audio equipment on a small computer. This proved a reliable method; in that it did not fail during any of the sessions and could easily and simply capture the length of discussion taking place. It was also one, however, which presented problems afterwards for the transcription of the recordings. This was because the manipulation of the recorded material backwards and forwards to get an accurate record of the multiple voices was difficult to do, while trying to type at the same time, because it had to be done manually and was rather clumsy to accomplish. Having worked previously in an administration setting I was used to typing from an audio-recording but using equipment where I had a foot-pedal, which facilitated typing simultaneously with far more ease. In retrospect, it would have been beneficial to the smooth processing of the audio-material, as well as safer to have had more than one way of recording the panel discussion groups such as a Dictaphone. This would also have helped in facilitating easier and quicker transcription, giving a safety net if one means of recording failed and helping when there were instances where what was being said could not be heard on one recording. If I was to do research of this nature again, and had the financial wherewithal, I might also investigate visual and

audio recording of the panel group together, as this would allow the easier transcription of what was said but also give the visual record of the group as they participated, their facial expressions and interactions with one another. This would, of course, require research both into reliable equipment and what was needed to ensure the whole group were adequately recorded from a variety of angles. It would also necessitate thought on how the material produced was stored and used, because participants could more easily be identified. These things having been taken into account, I would still consider it as an option.

The second, concerns the recruitment of the panel discussion groups. The advertisement for participants shared on the University of Leicester's weekly bulletin resulted very quickly in a large volume of potential participant enquiries, far more than I had anticipated. This was gratifying, as it affirmed an interest in *Doctor Who*, however, it also presented a question. It was apparent immediately that there was the potential to recruit two groups from those who had come forward. In conjunction with my supervisor, I decided to adjust the research design, letting go of the need to recruit participants in an unknown sphere in Wandsworth and accepting the bountiful supply of ready participants who presented themselves through the University of Leicester. It should be noted this was only done after it had been observed that there was a spread of people across those coming forward, such that not all of them were undergraduates or indeed students. There were people working for the university in administrative and other capacities, as well as academic staff. Unexpectedly, given the work I had read on *Doctor Who* fans, there was a high proportion of women too.

A second screening was arranged, therefore, in Leicester from amongst those not selected for the first screening and panel group. They were approached about their availability on an alternative date a week later (when it had been established the same venue was free to use at the same time). While this choice meant I did not recruit participants from another different location, it did significantly enhance the speed with which the screenings took place. I was working in an environment where I had already had some knowledge of the ways in which it was easiest to communicate with people, and the mechanism for recruitment was one which was familiar to people studying and

working at the University, where each week's email bulletin would offer various opportunities to participate in research of a variety of ways. In retrospect, the drawback was that the speed of the first two screenings and recordings did not then offer much opportunity for me to reflect on what had happened.

The third screening at Wesley House in Cambridge took place a month later, recruitment having taken place through the college and participants included not only students for ministry, but several spouses and one teenage child. Due to the nature of contemporary ministerial training, this also allowed for a spread of ages. The final screening took place a month after this, at a Methodist Church in North London. Here the recruitment was done via the Youth Worker. This was the only occasion on which a large number of those recruited did not arrive on the day. At each of the previous three screenings, bar one person, those who had said they would come, had, and this meant I anticipated this occurring again. This time, over half the arranged participants simply did not arrive. I decided, however, to go ahead because those who had come were eager to participate and the shortfall in number was remedied by the participation of the Youth Worker and another adult who was present on that afternoon. Obviously, this did have an impact on the overall numbers who had taken part. Over four screenings there were now thirty participants, instead of the initial estimate of between thirty-two and forty, based on eight to ten participants at each screening. Due to the balance of having four screenings built into the original research design, I decided, after some consideration, that this was close enough to the lower end of the original estimated number not to warrant the recruitment of another group. This was particularly the case because it would have disrupted the pattern of four panel discussion groups, with two predominantly Christian and two predominantly none-Christian ones, by adding a fifth group which would have had to be recruited from a different community.

The third reflection is on the panel discussion groups themselves. Like any skill, facilitating the conversation, especially among a group of strangers, is one which develops with practice. On reflection, it would have been helpful to have piloted what I was doing more than once, and definitely with a group of people with whom I was unfamiliar. The advantage of working with people whom I knew was that they were

prepared to give me feedback on the experience, being used to me operating with them in a similar way to open up and encourage discussion. They were thus able to point out aspects of what was happening which were not clear to them and which needed refining. The experience, however, did not provide the opportunity for me to practise what it would be like working with a group who did not know me or each other. This was not a huge problem, because the members of the panel discussion groups knew the purpose for which they had been recruited. It did cause me, however, to reflect on the group dynamics and my own part in them. There was, for example, in each group (except the final smaller one) one participant who remained virtually silent for the entire discussion. Without singling this person out for their silence and thus exercising my power as the facilitator in way which I deemed inappropriate, it proved very difficult to coax any reaction from them. In the end, I decided that their silence was a genuine part of the process, even if interpreting it was impossible without straying from the empirical imperative central to this research. It did strike me though as something which I would have to think about were I to undertake this kind of research in this way again.

As I did each panel group, I stuck to the same initial questions and pattern of questions, as much as possible to encourage comparable conversations, however, there also had to be flexibility to follow-up material which presented itself. Looking back and particularly listening to the recordings of the discussion groups, I realise that in my hesitation about overly influencing what happened (because of the critique of theologians working in this field mentioned earlier), there were times when I did not pursue particular issues as fully as I might have. This was because I had become too conscious of not wanting to impact on the direction of the discussion. This, in turn, meant that avenues for fruitful exploration were not followed up extensively as they could have been. In retrospect, more piloting would have given me the chance to discover this issue in a setting where I could have experimented more freely with what was happening. I have, therefore, gained valuable knowledge from this experience myself and would suggest greater piloting to someone undertaking similar work in the future.

The fourth reflection is on the recruitment of the groups. Whereas I had initially been thinking only of how to successfully recruit participants through avenues I knew, the resulting experience disclosed another piece of information. The recruitment of the groups had, by virtue of their locations, inadvertently created different circumstances for them with regard to group dynamics. The groups in Leicester recruited from the staff and students of the University, on the whole, did not know each other, although it was clear one or two people did have some acquaintance. On the other hand, those recruited in Cambridge and North London, did know each other beforehand. This did not appear to affect the nature of the conversations strongly when they were analysed, however, it was a factor of which I would take more account in any further research.

The fifth, and final, reflection relates to something which was mentioned above with regard to the audio recording. Although I had read and been advised that it was important to transcribe the material as soon as possible afterwards, this proved problematic both because of the nature of the audio recording named above and because of the multiple voices speaking, which I had no previous experience of transcribing. I struggled with trying to do it for months, aware that doing it myself was supposed to be part of the initial stage of the coding process, which will be explored at greater length below. I had also been advised that it was the best way to get a good, deep knowledge of and relationship with the data. Unfortunately, wrestling with the transcriptions in this way ended up creating the opposite effect, it began to distance me from the empirical material. Eventually, because the transcription was holding up, rather than forwarding, the data analysis, I admitted defeat and paid for a professional to transcribe the panel group discussions. This they did quickly and efficiently. It was an enormous relief to have reached this point and one which restored my relationship with the data, which had begun to be eroded by the sense of not being able to accomplish something I was supposed to. In retrospect, it would have been more effective within the time frame available, to have had the panel group discussions transcribed by a professional immediately. This would have side-stepped the difficulty of not being able to accomplish it myself and maintained a more positive relationship with the data. Both the nature of the audio-recording and the practicalities of transcription are things which I would do differently, were I to undertake similar research again.

The Data Analysis

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter I made the decision early on in the research design process to used grounded theory to process the empirical data. I investigated whether using specialist computer software (such as Nvivo) was practical or useful in conjunction with this data but ultimately decided that doing the coding and categorising myself was essential, to create a depth of familiarity with the material (particularly since I had not now transcribed it) and to experience first-hand as a novice, what was involved. The process of using grounded theory usually involves three steps:

- *Open coding* to find categories.
- *Axial coding* to interconnect them.
- *Selective coding* to establish the core category or categories (Corbin and Strauss 2008 taken from Robson 2011:489)

As I wrestled with transcribing the data collected, the process of data analysis began because the action of transcribing the material initiates ideas about possible codes and categories. The process of open coding required me to become,

> thoroughly familiar with the data available...and have a first set of ideas about what is in the data and what you feel is interesting and may be important about them (Robson 2011:479).

This was much easier, once the transcriptions had been completed, because I was able to immerse myself in the material and begin to interpret what was in the transcripts of the panel group discussion groups rather than paying constant attention to the practicalities of getting the transcribing correct. With the transcripts prepared I was able to begin by breaking them down into smaller parts. As Robson notes:

> The size of the part chosen is whatever seems to be a unit in the data, perhaps a sentence, or an utterance, or a paragraph. The question asked is 'what is this piece of data an example of? The code applied is a label. It is provisional and may be changed (Robson 2011:489).

This provisionality was an important aspect of the process to grasp, as was the fact that the same piece of data could be being coded several times, if it fell within different possible labels (Robson 2011). To begin with it was very difficult to find a way into the coding and categorising process particularly for a novice. At this stage I was aware possible codes might include the following: liking or disliking what has been viewed, identifying or not with characters, relating or not to their life. My thoughts on potential codes were informed by the research focus on what people were doing with the programmes they had watched but I had to ensure they were not constrained by any expectation that this would be something theological or religious, even if the material explicitly or implicitly contained religious imagery or what I would label as theological concepts.

As Weston et al note (Weston 2001) the coding and categorising is process of detective work, seeking out clues to what is important within the data, trying out different narratives and exploring their meaning to come up with a coding system and then allowing that that system may need to be changed in light of further developments (Weston 2001). I had to ask myself, what patterns of interpretation and response emerged within the groups and across them? Were there certain words, phrases, feelings or ideas with recurred? What discourses, if any, was it possible to identify which the group were bringing into the room for the purposes of negotiating and interpreting the text they were viewing e.g. being a fan of *Doctor Who,* wanting to dismiss television fiction as of no value, responding to particular characters or themes? How did they handle differences about the programme within the group and how were they resolved?

Weston et al's (Weston 2001) far larger research project (the researchers interviewed six Professors several times and observed them in a classroom setting to investigate the way in which they reflected on their work), once the coding process had begun they did not do any more interviews or observation as would usually happen in the use of grounded theory, this research also uses an adapted version of grounded theory for the same reason. This is because I did not envisage that further screenings would be held to produce more data, and therefore, more categories and codes produced until a point of saturation is reached and the researcher could adequately predict what is likely to come up in the next group (Bryman 2012, Weston 2001). Instead, once the group interviews have happened, the coding and categorising took place and provided an indicative set of data with which to work. It was a possibility that a point of *theoretical saturation* might occur with regard to the data collected, but there were to be no further screenings which, as I understand it, would be the usual route to that point of theoretical saturation when using grounded theory. This was because, within the time-frame available it was not deemed possible for one person to recruit, hold, facilitate and transcribe and analyse data to the point at which this would occur. In fact, as can been seen later from the data analysis, there was a great deal of confluence between the groups, so that although a point of theoretical saturation according to grounded theory was not reached, significant new categories were not emerging.

It was also recognised that when the data has been collected and analysed, the initial research questions could well be superseded by others which were prompted by the material in the transcripts of what has taken place in the panel group discussions. As will be seen, this was the case and particular questions became less important or fell away as others came to prominence. This was especially the case with how questions around meaning-making were phrased, with the dropping of questions around moral, philosophical, ethical and religious material in favour of the recognition that these things were expressed through other means and discourses, as for example with the concern for gender and power which emerged. Where grounded theory worked well with this material is that it did not allow me to neglect what was there in the data, in preference to any preconceived idea of what was happening. For instance, I had to keep in mind that one of the possible outcomes was that those taking part would not relate to this piece of popular culture in any way which indicates a substantial relationship to

theology at all. As will be seen, in one sense, for many of the participants this was the case and yet, crucially, as will be seen this did not render the data or analysis theologically irrelevant.

As I began the process of coding, I started to categorize the material, and at this stage I had also to bear in mind any possible connections between the different codes and categories produced. It was important that notes were made of these thoughts and ideas about what might link the categories in memos, so that what struck me 'along the way' was kept and recorded and could be returned to at a later date. The process, as described by Weston and her colleagues is one in which the researcher is constantly moving very close to the material and then drawing back from it (Weston 2001). This is rather like focussing on something under a microscope to look at part of it in detail and then, drawing back to look at it in its entirety from a distance with the naked eye, or looking through binoculars at something in the distance to see the detail and then seeing it without them to view the whole landscape. The idea is to maintain, during the data analysis, a view which takes both the micro and macro perspectives into account.

In reality, as a beginner in using grounded theory, these two perspectives proved immensely difficult for me to hold in tension. I found that in attempting to do line-by-line coding, what happened was that I kept getting lost in the data; although I could describe what was happening in the data, I discovered a profound problem in stepping back from it and analysing it. Again here, my anxiety about imposing anything upon the data or missing anything of significance, meant that over and over, I was hampered in drawing back from it to gain some distance from it. This was further compounded by my sense, at least initially, that using grounded theory, meant that I was simply to work from the transcripts. The situation became somewhat easier once I understood that I could make use of other literature in more detail, however, the difficulty in trying to stand back from the material and not remain immersed in a descriptive mode was one with which I wrestled for a long time. I understood that it was necessary from time to time to stand back from the data to keep perspective and also, to keep on returning to it, looking at it again and comparing different parts to make sure everything that can be draw out has been. It was a complex and isolated experience for a someone new to this

way of working, as I struggled to learn how to do this. It was like looking at a painting and being able to describe what you see in terms of colour and texture, without being able to stand back and perceive what those things convey when they are together on the canvas.

On reflection I can see that one of the problems was that as a student of theology, much of the working I do is in my head. The initial coding should produce a long list of codes which can then be drawn into a number of concepts, as with the work of Golding on museum visitors which Bryman uses as an example of how the coding process unfolds. He notes of Golding:

> She conducted a line-by-line analysis of the interview transcripts, which generated a huge number of codes and words. She reduced this vast array of codes to themes that helped to understand her data, and this produced seven concepts, such as: the stimulation of nostalgia, the desire for education, and experience of alienation from the past. Each of these concepts had distinctive properties or dimensions. For example, the stimulation of nostalgia was encapsulated in such things as a sense of retreat from the present and a 'rose-tinted' recollection of the past. (Bryman 2012:572)

It is not possible to hold all of this information mentally, which is how I would work from a theological perspective. Working theologically, of course, there would be reading, making notes, reflecting, thinking and eventually presenting an argument or discussion of a theory or doctrine. Here I was adrift. It was difficult to find a way to express what the data meant through the codes, or at least, the meaning as I was interpreting it. I simply was not sure of what language or concepts to use. I realise now, that unlike theological work, where there is plenty of existing material from which to begin, this was because I had nothing comparable to work from and therefore, conceptually was finding it difficult to articulate analytically rather than descriptively. I could describe what I saw, but to return to Callum Brown's categories relating to Christianity (2001), I was experiencing having little or no discursive framework from

which to find a vocabulary to conceptualise and analyse it. Eventually, I managed to move from holding my thoughts in my head, by writing pieces on overarching categories for my supervisor. I realised that even if there was nothing available which was completely the same, there was work which was helpful and it would not unacceptable or inappropriate to make use of it. It was, however, a profoundly alienating experience to discover how hard I found it to work with the empirical data which was so vital to this research. The process of writing the pieces for my supervisor did move me on to the next stage of coding, which is called axial or theoretical coding. It required me to begin putting the data back together seeking to find and focus on the possible relationships and connections between the different categories discovered via the initial coding process (Robson 2011). Thus for me, the coding process and the memos produced concerning the categories became one, as they were expressed on the page.

The third and final stage of the coding process of the data is the selective coding. The purpose of this is to find what the central core category is which integrates the rest of the categories.

> Corbin and Strauss (2008) approach this task via the *story line.* This starts as a description of what axial coding has produced. You have to move from this descriptive account to a conceptualization of the story line. In other words you are seeking a core conceptual category which enables you to understand the story line (Robson 2011: 491).

This way of understanding the final core category was not wholly utilised in this research, as it was not appropriate to try and harmonise all the categories into one storyline, however neat this would have been. Instead, because of the exploratory nature of data, it was important to allow as much as possible of what had been observed and analysed from the data, space within the final write up.

Once the data had been analysed, and the final analysis and conclusion drawn from the empirical data, this was then located in the context of the material from chapter one

concerning current work on theology, religion and popular culture, as well as indicating other literature which required attention in order to engage with the data both from a non-theological and theological viewpoint.

Concluding comment

This is the first empirical study in this field (theology, religion and popular culture) on a popular television programme in the British context. The methodology, therefore, is itself a process of learning and provides an opportunity not only to examine whether (and if so, how) Christian and non-Christian audiences are using a piece of popular culture for the purposes of meaning-making. It also adds to the ongoing dialogue within this academic field, particularly with regard to the interdisciplinary work which has been called for and how this can be accomplished (Lynch 2009, Wright 2009) and on the use of empirical research (Marsh 2007 and 2009). My experience of the empirical aspect of the research is that although it was undoubtedly hard to accomplish, and there are, as I have indicated several things which I have learnt, it was ultimately a worthwhile and rewarding endeavour to work in this way. I will argue in the following chapter that the analysis of the data provide material which was of significant theological value.

Chapter Three

Introduction to exposition and analysis of data

In this chapter I will examine the major categories which emerged from the analysis of the empirical data. I will then explain why I have chosen to focus on specific categories from those which arose and explore why they are so crucial. I will introduce the key concepts and conversation partners which have assisted in the analysis of the data. I will do this so that I can begin to answer the questions which are central to this thesis; how, if at all do people relate their own lives and experiences to the episodes of *Doctor Who* they have viewed? What connections do they make, if any, between the episodes they watch and their lives, self-identity or world view and how are these expressed in conversation (e.g. via identification with storyline or characters or values expressed)?

Entertainment: 'codswallop', 'escapist nonsense', 'pulp fiction'

I begin this exposition and analysis of the data gathered by drawing attention to one particular comment which was unique in order to focus on 'meaning-making'. During the four panel discussion groups this was the only occasion on which a participant directly voiced an opinion which challenged the approach of the other group members, who were talking about the programmes with interest, sharing opinions or simply staying silent.

> 'I'm just struggling to take it all that seriously. It's a load of codswallop and its entertainment…' 'it's escapist nonsense. It's, it's a trash novel, it's pulp fiction you watch it, you put it down, 'erm that's it really.' (**Interviewee 6: WH3**)

Here, this participant voices his doubts about the value of the conversation which is taking place. He is finding the approach of the others, the 'seriousness' with which they are discussing what he characterises, as a disposable piece of 'entertainment', difficult to take seriously; it is also noteworthy that he is confident enough within the group to

share an alternative position. He recognises that he finds it hard to view the programmes he has seen as anything other than something which is primarily for entertainment, and entertainment for him is something which is of the moment and then forgotten about. For this man to 'see' anything more within the programmes is to give more status to them than he is willing to grant. The viewer's relationship with the programmes is, for him transitory; the episode is seen and then it is over and 'that's it'. It is clear he approaches the programmes watched with a strong sense of judgement about their lasting value, using a number of negative words here to express his thoughts; 'a load of codswallop', 'escapist nonsense', 'trash', 'pulp fiction'. His wording is strong and dismissive in tone; however, he can also acknowledge, within the discussion panel, his view is an alternative one to that which is both underlying and dominating the discussion. The next participant to speak responds with a view which is more typical of the panel discussion group as a whole; her comment demonstrating an understanding of the programmes as something more than entertainment.

> 'But it's a typical thing – most good science fiction writers use science fiction in order to examine a situation within the world of their particular time.'
> **(Interviewee 2: WH3**)

This participant also makes a value judgement about the programmes she has viewed. She places them alongside 'good science fiction', whose 'writers' are therefore telling and shaping their narrative to deliberately reflect on contemporary issues. The resulting story and its realisation in the television programme is viewed as something which has been produced and shaped with deliberation not only to entertain but also 'to examine a situation within the world of their particular time'. For her, this is 'a typical thing' to encounter when experiencing the work of 'most good science fiction writers'. While this participant articulated her perspective very clearly and succinctly, others were less direct in their appraisal but nevertheless through their participation demonstrated a willingness to engage with the programmes as of more than transient value only.

In the same conversation there was also a comment, from the man who had dismissed the programmes as 'entertainment', which gave some context to his original dismissal. As can be seen below, what had, at least in part, shaped his response, was being asked to analyse Shakespearean texts when studying as a teenager for his exams. This appears to have set up a dichotomy for him between looking for meaning and entertainment, which was still problematic. In contrast, a woman, who calls herself a 'lit major', finds her experience of examining texts supports the idea that deeper meaning is present within stories which are also entertainment. This view is then supported by five other group participants in quick succession.

> 'I can't get away from the thought that we're trying to analyse something which is basically written for entertainment and are we putting, you know when you, when you're at school and did Shakespeare at O-level, all these little phrases had a deep inner meaning, couldn't he have just written it…for entertainment and that's, that's that's the problem I have with this.' (**Interviewee 6: WH3**)
>
> I'm a lit major, I would say no *(laughter)* (**Interviewee 4: WH3**)
>
> …
>
> Yeah but when you look deeper you see more… (**Interviewee 2: WH3**)
>
> Yeah but, was it written with that in mind? (**Interviewee 6: WH3**)
>
> Yes (**Interviewee 2: WH3**)
>
> Yes (**Interviewee 1: WH3**)
>
> Oh very much so (**Interviewee 5: WH3**)
>
> Oh yeah. And, and novels…are written too.' **(Interviewee 4: WH3**)

I have started with this incident because it is important to delineate how the term 'meaning-making' is understood and utilised in this research. In the arena of the study of theology, religion and popular culture it is a term which has provoked discussion with which it is necessary to engage, in order to define how it is being used here. Therefore, at this point, it is helpful to take an excursus in dialogue with the work of

Gordon Lynch, who has written and researched extensively in this area (Lynch 2002, 2005, 2007a and 2007b). He has considered how this work has been undertaken and suggested ways in which it could be developed (Lynch 2009). Of interest in relation to the term 'meaning-making' and its use in this analysis is an article for the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Film* (Lyden 2009) in which he addresses research on religion, theology and film and the use of the term 'meaning-making'. Lynch notes,

> Forged in the secularized academic ethos of the 1960s and 1970s, in which a common assumption was that religion was a diminishing social force not worthy of serious attention, film studies and cultural studies have typically shown very little interest in religion. (Lynch 2009:275)

While in the ten years since this was written, the situation has altered somewhat in the broader field of the study of theology, religion and popular culture, Lynch's observations on how the academic background of those participating in research at the intersection of theology, religion and film ('biblical scholars', 'theologians' and scholars of religion') has influenced on the 'kind of questions and methods of study' remain worthy of attention (Lynch 2009:275). He asserts,

> One of the strengths of this literature has been that its contributors usually have a much greater religious literacy than their academic peers in cultural studies or film studies, and are able to comment with greater insight and authority on religious traditions, communities and practice. (Lynch 2009:275)

However, he also critiques the way in which, while exercising deeper knowledge in relation to film in this area, those coming from these academic backgrounds ('biblical scholars', theologians' and 'scholars of religions'), have sometimes ignored or only demonstrated a passing acquaintance with existing academic work on the study of film and the 'questions, theories and methods' used therein (Lynch 2009:275/6). Lynch quotes the late Melanie Wright, also a proponent of the use of cultural studies in research on film and religion, who wondered, 'if such an interest in theological ideas

dominates over an interest in the medium of film, 'could it be that …*film* is not really being studied at all?' (Lynch 2009:276). Lynch acknowledges both that the questions and perspectives which arise from a religious or theological perspective (films as 'examples of contemporary myth' or 'texts that convey religious symbolism or significance' or 'as just another kind of (narrative) theological text which deals with religious or existential questions) have a 'valid place in academic work in this field'; and that there has been development in the way in which scholars working in this field have engaged with more fully with existing academic theories and methods (Lynch 2009: 276). His main objection remains that films should not be studied from a religious or theological perspective as if they are simply 'theological or religious texts' (Lynch 2009:275).

As noted earlier, Lynch then goes on to make the case for the use of cultural theory and cultural studies in study of theology, religion and film, outlining briefly the academic history of these areas, the way in which they have been used in relation to film and the relationship between the two. He pays attention particularly to the 'circuit of culture', a concept suggested by Richard Johnson (Johnson 1986) which highlights the potential for cultural studies of examining different elements of the production of a cultural text or artefact, the text or artefact itself and its reception or use and how these points on the 'circuit of culture' were themselves shaped by their own context. Using the work by du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay and Negus (1997) on the production and consumption of the Sony Walkman (Lynch 2009: 282), in which they detailed a revised version of the 'circuit of culture' Lynch goes on to outline the way in the study of film and religion could be widened.

> By focusing on these questions of production, social identity, consumption, and regulation, the text of the film is placed in a much broader historical, cultural, social, political, and economic framework. Thinking about film in terms of the circuit of culture moves us away from the idea of films as static texts, and toward understanding film within dynamic social and cultural processes whose meaning and significance depend on the point in the circuit of culture from which one views it. (Lynch 2009:283)

Lynch continues by outlining how this way of working with and thinking about popular culture could provide a number of valuable avenues of research and questioning for study of popular culture and religion, including those pertaining to production choices and possible religious markets and audiences, the use of new technologies and the impact on distribution, the ways in which particular religious audiences make choices about what it is acceptable to watch and how this relates to their religious identity. At this stage, for Lynch, the study of audience reception is 'largely undeveloped', although there is an increasing sense that this area of work is necessary and worthwhile (Lynch cites: Lyden 2003; Marsh 2004; Nolan 2003; Lynch 2007b) and the work on audience studies by the Center of Media, Religion and Culture at the University of Colorado, Boulder (Lynch cites: Hoover, *et al* 2003; Hoover 2006 Schofield Clark 2005) (Lynch 2009:284/5). Lynch argues, however, citing audience reception work by Deacy (2005) and Marsh (2007b), that it is still 'too closely wedded to a theological agenda' (Lynch 2009:285).

> But greater care needs to be taken with regard to the notion of 'meaning-making' in this context. In one sense, the act of watching a film, like any form of cultural activity, generates meaning for its audiences, but this meaning is not necessarily (or indeed usually) at the level of existential meanings or theological understandings about the meaning of life. As the anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973:5) has argued, the human person is 'an animal suspended in webs of significance that he (*sic)* himself has spun' and these webs of meaning constitute human culture. Theological interpretations of meaning-making aspects of culture are still often influenced by Paul Tillich's (1959) idea that, at heart, human culture is constructed around basic religious and existential issues of 'ultimate concern'. But if scholars in the study of religion and film attend only to evidence of how audiences use film to negotiate such issues of ultimate concern, they risk missing and undervaluing the far more mundane meanings that films may have for audiences. If we are to develop more general accounts of how films may function as a source of religious and existential meaning for people in cultural settings in which fewer people engage directly with traditional institutional forms of religion, then we need to be equally attentive to the ways

> in which the films do not function in this way if we are to have a nuanced sense of the real significance of film in people's lives. (Lynch 2009:285)

This discussion concerning 'meaning-making' has been necessary at the start of this initial chapter relating to the analysis of the empirical data because it is vital to articulate how the term 'meaning-making' is being used in this study. When the term is used or referred to in this research, (as its central questions and methodology indicate), it is not circumscribing the responses which those participating made to the episodes they watched with a theological agenda or overlaying them with existential significance. The methodology used and the academic conversations partners in the analysis take seriously reporting on and engaging with the breadth of reception evinced in the discussions. 'Meaning-making', therefore, is used here in a broad sense to indicate and begin to describe 'the webs of significance' which are named by Clifford Geertz (Lynch 2009:285) and which can be identified in the transcripts of the panel discussions, their coding and analysis. It is asking questions about the complexity of those 'webs of significance', how they become visible in the conversations, how they intersect with one another, what material for their formation is brought into the room by the participants and what is it which is important, therefore, to the participants.

In relation to this, there is one aspect of Lynch's engagement with the term 'meaning-making' which it is necessary to question. In his argument Lynch makes a strong case for research on film from a theological perspective to allow room for 'meaning-making' by audiences which is 'far more mundane', which is not concerned with questions of 'ultimate concern' or 'existential meanings or theological concerns about the meaning of life' (Lynch 2009:285). As has been stated, this research on a popular television programme, seeks through its methodology to examine and reflect on the whole spectrum of responses made in the panel discussions. However, it resists the way in which Lynch frames one aspect of his argument. By utilising the categories, 'ultimate', 'existential', 'theological' in dichotomy with those meanings which are classified as 'far more mundane', Lynch is not abandoning completely the viewpoint which he is critiquing; for by whom and on what grounds are audience responses deemed to fall

within the range of 'far more mundane' and when do they become 'ultimate' or 'existential' or 'theological'? (Lynch 2009:285). Often, as studies have shown (Hoover 2006) it is in ordinary and everyday speech and action that 'meaning-making' occurs and is revealed. Consequently 'meaning-making', as it is being used in this chapter, does not seek to offer categorisation into either 'ultimate', 'existential', 'theological' or 'mundane', but to reflect, in dialogue with the material produced and other academic conversation partners on what took place and how this may be understood.

Using this broad understanding of 'meaning-making' as the starting point, this chapter will show how, from the transcribed conversations of the panel groups, those participating did, in a variety of ways relate their own lives and experiences to the programmes they watched together. As this process of 'meaning-making' is examined, it is also worthwhile bearing in mind Ien Ang's comment about her own ground-breaking work on *Dallas* and the letters she received.

> What they say about *Dallas* is no more than a snapshot of their reception of the programme, an attempt to put a diffuse viewing experience into words. And when something is put into words there are always things which remain unexpressed and implicit. (Ang 1985:14)

What took place in the panel discussions offers insights into the processes of the 'meaning-making' in relation to these episodes of *Doctor Who*. It is not definitive however, but rather indicative. I will argue that the empirical data also demonstrates the way in which distinguishing the 'mundane' from the 'existential', or 'moral', or even 'theological' or 'spiritual' in 'meaning-making' as a process of human interaction is not simple or straightforward, precisely because it is created from and made visible through beautiful 'webs of significance' and meaning spun out of numerous strands of personal and cultural experience (Geertz 1973:5).

The emergent codes:

In the next section I will introduce the codes which emerged from the empirical data. I examine the ways in which the different codes often overlapped or were linked creating the 'webs of significance' (Geertz 1973:5), and how eventually they were grouped into categories. Finally, I will explore which categories I have chosen to examine more extensively and why. In order to allow the codes and their resulting categories space to speak for themselves, I will begin by describing the content of the categories directly as they emerged from the analysis, only then will I move to conversation with other discussion partners, which will assist in clarifying the categories by bringing them alongside existing material.

Family

I have chosen 'family' as the first category I will consider. Both chosen episodes featured families as part of the narrative, however, I was unprepared for the way in which this one small word would provide an umbrella for a cluster of codes encompassing a huge range of different but related things, somewhat like a family themselves. This category helpfully illustrates both the complexity and the interconnected nature of the 'webs of significance' (Geertz 1973:5). Thus, 'family' ranges from discussions on the nature of the programmes themselves - whether they were made with the family audience in mind and how this effects the content, the scheduling, the way particular 'issues' such as drugs, human relationships, violence are included and dealt with, to changes in family viewing over the years during which *Doctor Who* has been running, also taking in the role of the BBC as the programme producer and a public service broadcaster. It also includes some very passionate disagreements about whether *Doctor Who* is or is not primarily a children's programme. This discussion particularly provoked some very strong opinions to the contrary, that the series is definitely not a children's programme. This was most vehemently expressed by a mature, adult, male, self-identified fan of the programme. There was conversation concerning how *Doctor Who* started, the public service remit of the BBC and the way in which this is likely to affect the kind of moral environment it wants or needs to portray. There was also comment on how this, in turn, affects the storylines

and production and the educational impetus. This was perceived as visible in its early history, although perhaps less so today, given the way in which history is perceived to have been 'played with'. This was not just the introduction of the characters into a real historical scenario, like the eruption of the volcano at Pompeii but also the inclusion of a 'Del Boy' cockney accent for one of the minor characters. There was comment too on the way in which films and programmes aimed at children have evolved, deliberately including humorous aspects which will amuse the parents watching with their children. As part of the discussion on the level of violence in the programme and its suitability for children the reaction of a female participant from overseas, who had not seen Doctor Who before (and may not have had much experience of British mainstream television programming) was significant, because she simply said the programmes were 'too violent'. This served to contextualise the discussion of what constitutes family viewing because it was not something which anyone else had identified in that way. Finally, in the *Fires of Pompeii* episode it was noted that the family shown were quite 'traditional', Dad, Mum and two children, a boy and a girl; while in *Gridlock*, which was set in the future, a variety of families were depicted, including an interspecies couple with a basket full of babies, a young couple expecting a baby striving to create a good life and a positive portrayal of a long-standing lesbian partnership. There was a strong response from participants to the way in which the families were shown, interacting and connecting to their own experience of family, which elicited both recognition, emotional engagement, and a sense of reality and emotional authenticity, even from something which was primarily science fiction.

I started with *family* as a category because exploring the significant number and variety of codes raised within it demonstrates two things. First, within this category the discussion moved between the portrayal of family, to the clash in discussions around whether *Doctor Who* is a children's programme, to the role of the BBC as a public service broadcaster, to the way in which family is used as an affective reality marker. Thus, it is immediately possible to observe the complexity of the 'webs of significance' which the participants were weaving and were enmeshed in already. Second, it can also be observed from the data that this was something of which they were aware and could reflect on.

Experience, affect, authenticity and realism.

The second category of codes which emerged has, unlike *family*, less of a sense of being strongly attached to a central unifying subject which appears within the narrative itself or is attached to the programme by way of its history and perception, and which provides an umbrella under which the codes can unify. Instead, this category is more like a *portmanteau*, into which a whole range of apparently different things are put but which, when they are examined have more in common than it would at first appear; they are all personal in some way and like the montage sequence of different families from *Gridlock*, which has been mentioned recently, they relate to experience. Experience is used here with both its dictionary definitions, as a noun and a verb. It may be a shared experience of something portrayed within the programme or shared with the characters in terms of observation or fact or knowledge, or it may be experience brought to bear by the participant on their interpretation and appreciation of the programme and sometimes shared with the participants. It can also be a shared sense of feeling between the viewer and what they see or between the participants. This use of experience appeared across a whole spectrum of comments and as will be shown, it was closely related to affect, to authenticity and to realism. As will be demonstrated the ways in which experience arises is multi-faceted ranging from the use of personal experience of an event, to professional experience which creates dissonance or resonance with the narrative, to discomfort with a sense of the affective space being manipulated in some way.

The comments coded as coming within the category of experience could range from acknowledgement of having all been in traffic jams, a central facet of the storyline in *Gridlock*, through to the use of more technical experience and knowledge. An excellent example of the latter is one female participant who shared that she was an astrophysicist and therefore, there was one thing particularly which disconcerted her within science fiction films and programmes.

> '…you watch these things and see all these explosions in space, but you wouldn't be able to hear it and you get very rare things…, they actually don't

have sound and you see that and you think, you've got it right for once. **(Interviewee 2: LE1**)

And then five seconds later they get something wrong. **(Interviewee 3: LE1**)

Well yes but to be fair we are discussing somebody who travels through time at this point so *(laughter)*. (**Interviewee 2: LE1**)

True, yeah (.) yeah that kind of (**Interviewee 3: LE1**)

In a police box.' (**Interviewee 2**:**LE1**)

The internal tussle displayed here is of note, between the participant's knowledge as an astrophysicist that there would be no noise accompanying explosions in space and that the programme is not depicting what would happen in reality; this is a source both of some annoyance and also, laughter. On the one hand she has a desire for the science fiction genre to get the facts correct and on the other, she is able to point out that the expectation of this kind of detail being right is unfair, given that the whole narrative world of the programme demands that viewers suspend their disbelief and embrace a world in which not only is space and time travel possible, but that the vehicle through which this is made possible is disguised as an old-fashioned police box. In the following chapter I will examine more closely the ways in which the threads of experience, affect, authenticity and realism are seen and woven into the 'webs of significance' (Geertz 1973: 5). Here, I want only to make the reader aware of their existence in the data.

While for the astrophysicist, it was the noise in space which upset her, for another participant it was the (mis) use of history in *The Fires of Pompeii* episode.

'I have to treat it as fiction and try not to care too much about it because otherwise it's really annoying *(laughter)* (**Interviewee 4: ED4**)

Ok can you say a bit more about that? (**Interviewer: ED4**)

> ‘Erm (.) I’m a history graduate so looking at Roman history and seeing it not necessarily, seeing it played with I have to accept that it’s being played with and that it’s not history (Interviewer: ok) so I find the futuristic ones perhaps sometimes easier because they’re definitely just stories.’ (**Interviewee 4: ED4**)

Here the same sense of struggle can be observed between the participant’s knowledge, (backed up by here the assertion, ‘I’m a history graduate’, in a similar way to the previous assertion, ‘I’m an astrophysicist’) and the recognition that the programme is something which has to be viewed as a ‘fiction’, even when it is set within a factual, historical event. The way in which this historical event is ‘played with’ is problematic for this participant and this will also be examined further in the following chapter, as the relationship between reality, authenticity, experience and affect is explored in greater depth.

This participant was not the only one to note the way in which history was ‘played with’; there were other comments concerning the reality and authenticity (or perceived lack thereof) and the sense of things being ‘played with’ across a spectrum of aspects of the programmes. These ranged from a participant noting the lack of New York accents in what is supposed to be New, New York in the futuristic *Gridlock*, to the human-feline hybrid offspring (depicted as a basket of kittens) of one of the interspecies couples in the same programme, to the portrayal of the priestesses and their involvement with the aliens in *The Fires of Pompeii* and the mockney accent of the stallholder who interacts with the Doctor and Donna there. Time and again what surfaced was tension between the different threads of the narratives as they strove in a science-fictional world to create a sense of authenticity and reality through a variety of means, such as the playful use of history or the affective nature of shared experience. Here is a comment from a female participant in the second panel discussion at Leicester in which she captures her sense of how the traffic jam engaged her.

> ‘I was actually amazed how much I was drawn in to like the second, actually started thinking about what it actually be like to be in those cars and how

claustrophobic it was, I started to feel quite sort of closed in by the, the scenario…'**(Interviewee F: LE2**)

This comment aptly sums up the way in which the experience of a situation, even imaginatively, creates the space for an affective connection which drew this viewer in, to the extent that not only was she aware of the 'claustrophobic' atmosphere on screen but was placing herself in it and began to 'feel quite closed in' herself while watching. Participants were able to articulate not only their affective response but reflect on how their engagement was encouraged and structured by the narrative. This can be observed in the exchange below about which are the best episodes to watch to get into *Doctor Who* and who they are written by.

'Have you been converted to watching *Doctor Who*, that's the question? (**Interviewee 2: LE1**)

I don't, I don't think so. (**Interviewee 7: LE1**)

Those are not the episodes to start with watching *Doctor Who.* (**Interviewee 3: LE1**)

So which would be the episodes to start with do you think? (**Interviewer: LE1**)

Anybody will say the Steve Moffat episodes usually from first or second season or *Girl in the Fireplace* from Season 3 because Steven Moffat's the writer that catches you from the get-go 'cos he can write it and make it believable even when it's fantasy (.) Russell T. Davies was never quite as good at that.' (**Interviewee 3: LE1**)

Here, Interviewee 3 describes and appreciates the writing of Steven Moffat, his ability to create a narrative which draws the viewer in from the beginning, conceiving a science-fiction world which is believable and commends this as being a good place to start with watching *Doctor Who*. There is a direct link made here between the

credibility of the narrative world, its ability to capture the viewer and its approachability for those who have not yet 'been converted to watching *Doctor Who*.' This awareness of the constructed nature of the programmes and both the mechanical and technical aspects of the storytelling, (e.g. the length of episodes, budget for special effects, the influence of recent developments in science-fiction television programming in the United States, the role of genre expectations and the debates mentioned earlier about whether or not *Doctor Who* is or is not a primarily children's programmer) were well represented in the discussion groups. The participants were able to reflect on what they had seen and able to identify the external factors which might influence how the narratives were chosen, developed and delivered. They were aware that things were placed within the stories to create empathy and affective connection. Thus, they could identify the little incidents with the Roman family in *The Fires of Pompeii* as ones in which and through which they, as viewers, were supposed to find some sense of reality and experience empathy. For example, when the son is reprimanded for coming home drunk or the daughter at the end is told she cannot go out in a robe that short in *The Fires of Pompeii* or the family snapshots in *Gridlock.* They were seen as deliberate attempts to show things which related 'to real life as far as *Doctor Who* can ever be real I think' (Interviewee 2: LE1). The fantasy world is rendered 'real' by the inclusion of experiences which are relatable and affective.

The final way in which I am going to highlight the relationship between experience, realism, affectivity and authenticity here is to examine the use of hymns in *Gridlock.* The appearance and participative singing of two traditional Christian hymns in *Gridlock* has provoked much consequent discussion concerning with what purpose and intent they were employed (Davies 2010). In the panel groups it elicited much discussion too. An example of the negative affective responses is given below.

> 'What did you make of the use of the hymns (.) in *Gridlock*? (**Interviewer: LE1**)
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> They made me cringe actually (Interview 3: yeah) but (Interviewer: ok) especially when the people started crying, or not all of them but some, even

> Martha, she was just, hearing them sing for the first time and suddenly she was that touched 'erm.' (**Interviewee 2: LE1**)
>
> …
>
> Yeah the hymn bit was a bit too much for me. I thought that the first time I saw it as well, it was just (.) too much corny the whole time (.) touching me that much 'erm maybe I'm, maybe we're going back to the heart of stone, maybe thats me, I wouldn't be overly surprised. 'Erm but no, that that bit 'erm I couldn't. (**Interviewee 2: LE1**)
>
> ...kind of like at 4 o'clock every afternoon they have, what they sing that? They just, they all gather around their screens and their cars...all sing? I was like, I can't, I can't deal with all that.' (**Interviewee 3: LE1**)

The affective response to the emotion portrayed in the programme during the hymn singing has two distinct identifiable elements which are nevertheless connected; first, it relates to the feelings which are shown by the characters when the hymns are sung, 'people started crying…even Martha…suddenly she was touched' and second, it elicits scepticism in these two participants, one unable to relate to everyone sharing collectively in this ritual of singing at the same time each day and the other because, the hymn-singing is 'too corny' to provoke the reaction it does in Martha, the character. The emotional content of what happened on screen does not strike a chord with these two participants, it makes them uncomfortable and is deemed to be 'too much'.

These very forceful negative responses to the hymns were not, however, universal across the panel discussion groups. There were more positive views expressed.

> 'You certainly get that, that powerful scene 'erm where (.) the woman's kind of realised that everything's gone wrong and there's no one there to help and then all of sudden the hymn kicked in and it's almost, it's like togetherness and they're all like well, it's alright, it's going to be fine 'erm and then it's nice that it gets echoed at the end when everything really is fine and it's almost like, yeah,

them sticking together … holds them in, tied in to that, that community that they had in *Gridlock*.' (**Interviewee 3: LE2**)

What is communicated here is a sense of power of the hymns to evoke an atmosphere within the narrative and to the viewers of hope and community in the face of enduring disaster. It must also be noted, however, the ensuing short discussion in this panel group disclosed a wide spectrum of engagement with the hymns. One participant wanted to know if what was used 'was that an actual hymn or was it specially written for the programme?'; another asked, 'So it's religious?'; a further speaker was not sure if it was religious and thought it might be 'just like a national anthem… I didn't really think it was religious, I thought it was more a patriotic sort of thing rather than religious'. One person could identify the first hymn used as 'Abide with Me' but admits they did not recognise the one used at the end of the programme. For two participants in this second group at Leicester the use of hymns and the emotion portrayed led them to wonder in their responses if there was supposed to be some sense in which 'brainwashing' was being conveyed in the narrative. Even within the two predominantly Christian groups, who were able to identify the hymns and associate with them, there were some questions of credulity around the hymns used. One participant particularly questioned why these hymns, which he characterised as 'old-fashioned' were used. Thus, while the use hymns could be thought of as adding a sense of reality and authenticity affectively, for the most part they would appear not to have achieved this. While their power was recognised by some, there was genuine bewilderment for others about what they were, and for others a sense of scepticism and questioning concerning their affective power was provoked. Lastly, for several participants, the emotion shown was something which they found difficult to view.

As I said at the start of this section on experience, affectivity, authenticity and realism, it is a far more *portmanteau* category than the first one of *family*. In the next chapter I will consider this category in further detail, reflecting with dialogue partners in greater depth on the way in which the different aspects of this category were revealed and interwoven. Suffice to say here that again, Geertz's assertion concerning the importance 'webs of significance' was demonstrated to be valid (Geertz 1973: 5).

The final categories I will attend to here are smaller and more tightly focussed ones than the first two of family and experience, affect, authenticity and realism. This is not to suggest however, they are any less crucial in comprehending the depth and range of codes and subsequent categories which were produced via the data.

Power – gender, moral/ethical choices and (theological) language

The third category of *power* has within it three different codes which it was nevertheless appropriate to associate under this heading. The first, *gender*, is perhaps no surprise, given that when the research took place all the actors playing the Doctor had been men. In each panel discussion the nature of the relationship between the Doctor and his companion(s) arose. It was a relationship which was characterised as 'complicated', rather like any human relationship (Interviewee 1: LE2). Participants had strong opinions about the two women, with some preferring Donna and some Martha as the Doctor's companion. Comparisons were made between the capabilities of the two women and their relationship with Doctor. Donna was characterised as a 'feisty' woman, one who does not take any nonsense from the Doctor and is prepared to challenge and question him. While this self-assertion was appreciated by some of the participants, for others the character was deemed too loud. In contrast, there was some sense of pity for Martha, who *Doctor Who* fans were aware followed Rose (with whom he had a very intense (almost) romantic relationship) as the Doctor's companion. Though Martha is training to be a doctor herself, participants questioned her ability to assert herself and her reliance on the Doctor to rescue her. They observed that his relationship with her was characterised by what was 'hero worship' on her part and a patronising attitude on his which they found uncomfortable. Participants also commented on the Doctor having a 'god complex'. While Martha longs for some recognition of the possibility of a romantic relationship, Donna denies any chance of this, even when it is referred to jokingly in the narrative. She calls the Doctor 'spaceman'. There was also discomfort from a minority of participants with the introduction of a romantic element with the re-boot of the show in 2005. What was obvious was that the power differential in the relationship between the Doctor and his companion was noticed and was a cause for comment, and that gender was an important

facet of this. I will return to this category of *power* and specifically to the code of *gender* in a later chapter.

The second code under the category of *power* is *moral/ethical choices*. This code itself is subdivided into two different aspects of the programmes. The first relates to the moral/ethical universe created within the programmes and the way in which participants understood this to be connected to the role of the producers of the programme, the BBC and their responsibilities as a public service broadcaster. This meant that the programmes are more likely to take an anti-drug stance, as seen in *Gridlock*, when the Doctor disapproves of the neck stickers which are being used to induce moods. Participants saw his immediate and complete aversion both as part of the plot but also, as part of the public service ethos and necessary for a programme broadcast within a family viewing slot. The second concerns the power the Doctor has to make life and death decisions. This was particularly apparent and noticed in relation to the ending of *The Fires of Pompeii.* The Doctor decides that history must follow the course intended, even then the eruption of Vesuvius is initiated by alien activity it must not be stopped. The Doctor choses the lesser of two evils and is seen instigating the explosion which will destroy the town of Pompeii and save the world, even in the knowledge that thousands will die. When asked about the central theme of the narrative, a participant from the second panel group in Leicester responded thus:

> 'First one, well I mean the Pompeii one for me is the decision that he has to make because he's tied (.) it sort of tied in with the right thing to keep history right 'erm but he, he hits the realisation that actually his, that part of history was, was always created by, or the situation was created by him making the choice between saving the whole planet (.) or just trying to save twenty thousand people and sacrificing the rest so I guess it's sacrifice really that's the main thing but it also boils down to his decision, which ones the right decision' (**Interviewee 4: LE2**).

It was noted that this *power* which the Doctor holds to make these choices is a 'burden' which he carries and a central 'dilemma' which 'crops up' in 'quite a few episodes' (Interviewee M: LE2). In *The Fires of Pompeii*, Donna pleads with him to save one family, the family they have got to know, and the Doctor listens and does so. Interviewee M viewed this as Donna bringing the Doctor 'back to the good side, the human emotions…' This again raises the gender of the characters, Donna the female companion is associated with drawing out of the (male) Doctor, emotion which is both human and good.

The *language* used to articulate this sense of the Doctor as someone with immense power, whose role it is to rescue others was of interest not only because of the gender issues raised. When discussing the Doctor, his character, action and motivation across the four panel groups the language used frequently had religious and/or theological undertones. For example, in one exchange during the first panel group in Leicester, the Doctor is talked about as someone who 'likes the fact he saves people', and 'he goes looking for trouble. He purposefully goes looking for someone to save.' (Interviewee 2 and 3 respectively) This was then associated by Interviewee 5 with having seen all of his own people killed. Interviewee 9 was unable to notice the suggested 'god complex', while Interviewee 6 did 'sort of agree with the god complex thing…kind of idolise, especially by the companions…'. Interviewee 3 makes a long comment in which it was noted that if the Doctor does set out to save people, 'he's going it is for good reasons' and not 'cos he wants everyone to bow down and worship.' In fact, it is pointed out, the Doctor usually wants his involvement to be kept secret, as he says at the conclusion of *The Fires of Pompeii* episode. The Doctor's desire to help and save others is then linked by the same speaker, 'because he's trying to atone for things he's done in the past'. In this person's view, the companions, (in place of those who are saved who do not know what he has done) respond to what he is doing by travelling with him and 'basically bows down', that is until he meets Donna, who 'doesn't really do that'. As can be observed from this small section of conversation, the language and concepts used to describe the Doctor have an underlying religious and theological aspect to them. Elsewhere the language of 'sacrifice', 'self-sacrifice', 'redemption' and 'good vs evil' also appeared. This will be discussed in greater depth in a later chapter, however, it was

important to note it here as part of the category of *power* because it indicates, the available language to define the Doctor's power and motivation may be seen, at least in part, as having a religious and theological quality to them.

This third category of *power* then includes within it a mixed bag of codes; gender, moral/ethical choices and the language used to describe the Doctor which had religious/theological undertones. I will argue in a later chapter that it is questions of *power* which link these three different strands within the 'webs of significance' (Geertz 1973: 5) and paying attention to this connection is a vital part of the analysis from a theological perspective.

Fan vs casual viewer

The final and smallest category is discrete but not discreet and is best described as being a kitbag in club colours. This captures the way in which it was clear that for *some* fans of the programme present within the panel groups, it was their knowledge and views as self-declared fans which was the most important guiding factor in their viewing and subsequent discussion of the programmes. Thus, for one man in the second Leicester panel group, it was important to ensure the correct language of 'companion' was used for Donna and Martha and that the romantic element introduced in the rebooted series was admitted as a 'mistake'.

> 'Well the term that's been used with Doctor Who since about 1970 onwards has really been companion with the remake what happened is that she started 'erm falling in love with the Doctor and Russell T. Davies admitted that he made a mistake there, 'erm there was unrequited love on her part then with Donna it was different kind of relationship and she was an older woman' (**Interviewee 2: LE2**).

The same man had very strong views about *Doctor Who* not being a children's programme, making these two remarks close together in a section of conversation.

> 'I've never, never seen Doctor Who as a children's programme (**Interviewee 2: LE2**).
>
> …
>
> A lot of people will say it is, but it's not the target …aimed at children etc. but I will never agree that it's a children's programme or why do you have so many being killed off if it's aimed at children. It just to me, say it's a children is too simplistic' **(Interviewee 2: LE2**).

He also used his knowledge of earlier series in the discussions about the nature of the series now, contrasting the stand-alone episodes with the stories which stretched out over four or six episodes in previous years. He was not the only fan to make use of this extra knowledge of the *Doctor Who* oeuvre in the discussion. A teenage fan in fourth panel group in North London was able to relate *The Fires of Pompeii* to an earlier occasion when the Doctor visited the Roman era in the very first series; furthermore, he knew that the Maccra, the creatures hiding beneath the surface in *Gridlock*, had also appeared previously in another era. It was apparent that this knowledge, beyond what the programmes were showing, was a crucial part of the way in which these men understood the programmes and judged them. Indeed, the man from the second Leicester panel group shared with them that he had a star system for evaluating episodes. Meanwhile, the young fan had an extensive knowledge of past episodes, all the different Doctors, companions and storylines; these he delighted in connecting to what he just seen and used to as a benchmark for judgement. He also remarked on the way in which the stories now had less time to develop than in what he called the 'classic' series. He was completely absorbed in the history and the narratives of the series, but that did not mean he lacked in reflection and even had suggestions for improvements, as seen below:

> ‘And they need a companion that’s not from earth ‘cos all of the new season have been earth companions but in the classics there were loads of alien companions like Romana who’s a Time Lord…’ (**Interviewee 1: ED4**)

The dedicated fans who were participants demonstrated that they came into the room with a baggage in the form of information and views about *Doctor Who* through which they contextualised and interpreted the programmes, revealing their knowledge of and allegiance to the series.

In this chapter I have summarised the main categories which emerged from the analysis of the empirical data, exploring the codes which feel within those categories. I have explored the debates around meaning-making, current in the study of religion, theology and popular culture and set out how it is being used within this research. I have begun to look at how the data answers the questions which are central to this thesis, noting that people do relate their own lives and experiences to the episodes they view. This happens in a variety of ways, from the use of professional experience, to the imaginative and affective. I have demonstrated that the participants used a number of different strategies for interpretation and were often aware of the different considerations which came into play both in their assessments and in the construction of the stories. I have also shown that there were certain elements within the programmes which provoked discomfort for participants for differing reasons.

Chapter Four
Experience, affect, authenticity and realism

In this chapter, using the empirical data, I will further examine the category which included realism, affect, experience and authenticity, demonstrating how these codes are related and complementary and are therefore categorised together here. I will work with various dialogue partners to argue that the creation and reception of a sense of realism and authenticity for the participants rests in large part on the use of shared experience (both with the programmes and within the group) and affective engagement with content of the programmes. I will attend to the occasions on which this relationship was disrupted for particular participants, examining why this happened and what this means for the argument. To begin with I will outline, using the work of Parsemain (2016) and Ang (1985) understandings of realism in relation to work with television audiences. I will then look at how these did (and did not) function with the data gathered here. I will argue that the modality of viewing position necessary for learning posited by Parsemain which must include emotional involvement and Ang's identification of emotional authenticity as vital, are key to understanding the creation of reality within the empirical data. Nevertheless, there are other important aspects of realism and authenticity, particularly shown by the moments when they were disrupted which are also of significance to this research.

Modalities of viewing, realism and authenticity

I will begin by engaging with the work of Ava Laure Parsemain. In her 2016 article, 'Do critical viewers learn from television', she examines how different modes of television viewing relate to and affect the possibility of learning from what is watched. She identifies the disagreement that exists between scholars concerning which mode of viewing better facilitates learning (Parsemain 2016). Using the work of other scholars in this area she differentiates between a 'critical viewing' position, which indicates the media literacy necessary to 'understand and analyse media content in order to learn from it' and a 'referential viewing' position, 'which means the viewer connects the television content to real life and accepts its 'reality' instead of analysing it from an intellectually distant position' (Parsemain 2016: 72). She also notes audience studies

which have demonstrated that a critical viewing position, 'can also hinder learning, particularly if viewers become cynical and intellectually distant from the televisual text', to the point where learning is difficult because the viewer's 'intellectual distance' affords them the space to 'resist its agenda and its teaching' (Parsemain 2016: 71). Meanwhile, 'referential viewing' is said by scholars to include 'closeness and identification' and 'emotional engagement' on behalf of the viewer and 'audience research shows that viewers learn by viewing …through referential involvement, emotional engagement, empathy or identification rather than dispassionate, rational analysis' (Parsemain 2016: 72). Parsemain then goes on to offer a definition of what it means to be a critical viewer who can nonetheless learn from television by positing a third position in which 'these positions can be combined' (Parsemain 2016: 75); 'critical involvement, which is a form of proximity or connection with the televisual text that facilitates learning through critical thinking' (Parsemain 2016: 72).

This research is not concerned with whether the participants 'learnt' anything from the programmes they watched; it is, however, concerned with examining and understanding the process(es) of meaning-making. Parsemain's work is helpful in offering a modality of viewing which captures a sense of the viewing position of the participants as demonstrated through the empirical data. The participants were, of course, discussing the two programmes they had watched together in an artificial circumstance. This, by its very nature, added to the impetus for 'critical viewing'; to analyse and to be aware of the constructed nature of the narratives and text of the programmes (see Parsemain 2016: 81 and the way in which she identifies from previous studies the impact of being in a focus group and participating in a 'discursive practice' and 'a performance' which is 'social' and 'not a state of mind'). Yet, even with this qualification, the data reveals a more complex and nuanced approach from the participants which has more in common with the 'critical involvement' position outlined by Parsemain. Like the previous studies, which she acknowledges have shown 'viewers can (and often do) shift between referential involvement and critical viewing', this was shown to be the case here. Furthermore, scholars have recognised that learning can take place from both positions and that certain genres of television, such as soap operas 'enable viewers to shift between these viewing positions' (Parsemain 2016: 75). Thus, Parsemain argues,

> …a literate or analytical reading of television does not always lead to intellectual distance and cynicism…' (Parsemain 2016: 78).

From the data I will demonstrate there are examples from the data which show 'intellectual distance' and an awareness of the way in which there are factors external to the narrative which are brought to bear on its construction, however, there are also occasions when there is emotional engagement and the traits of referential viewing (e.g., where participants saw 'the characters and storylines as realistic and relatable and drew parallels with their own lives') are displayed (Parsemain 2016: 89). Fundamental to this was the way in which 'the everyday life of ordinary people' (most often associated with the soap opera genre according to Parsemain) and the inclusion of narrative scenarios which heightened a sense of shared experience, worked to create programmes which, while ostensibly in the science-fiction and fantasy genre, allowed their interpretation by the participants as realistic, relatable and authentic, qualities which Parsemain posits as 'necessary in order to learn from the media' (Parsemain 2016: 87). Parsemain herself addresses the fact that even science fiction, though 'disconnected from everyday life reality…may be educational if it is emotionally or psychologically realistic and resonates with viewers' real-life emotions, experiences or situations' (Parsemain 2016: 90).

As I said above, I am not concerned with the subject of learning from television, but the conclusion of Parsemain's argument, that the possibility of learning from television requires 'that viewers must view a programme referentially…they must trust that it is authentic or realistic depiction of the world' is pertinent because it is these aspects of realism and authenticity which she identifies (e.g. emotional and psychological realism which chime with the viewers' own) and how they were generated through the programmes which are of interest here (Parsemain 2016: 89). This sense of the importance of feeling in relation to realism can also be seen in the ground-breaking work of Ien Ang on *Dallas* and the pleasure it inspires. Ang examines the concept of 'realism' in relation to the responses she received from those who wrote her letters about *Dallas* in reply to her advert placed in a Dutch women's magazine, *Viva* (Ang 1985). She reflects on the responses made by her letter writers and asks 'Why then do

so many fans call *Dallas* 'realistic'? What do they recognize as 'real' in its fictional world?' (Ang 1985: 41). She notes,

> 'Realism' seems to be a favourite criterion among viewers for passing judgement on *Dallas*. And here 'realistic' is always associated with 'good' and 'unrealistic' with 'bad' (Ang 1985:34).

But what exactly is it Ang asks which is experienced and understood as 'realistic'? She examines three options; first, 'empiricist realism' when the reality of the world beyond the programme is seen to be replicated in an 'adequate' fashion. The problem for Ang with this definition of 'realism' is that the viewers themselves bring (often substantially) different expectations about what constitutes 'reality'. Second is 'classical realism', in which Ang uses the work of Colin McCabe to locate the way in which *Dallas* functions like a 'classic realistic text', where certain rules about how the story is told (e.g. transparent narration) are used to create the 'illusion of reality' (Ang 1985: 45). For Ang this is still a description, however, which falls short of encompassing the full experience of her letter writers.

> *What* is told in the narrative must also play a part in the production of pleasure (Ang 1985: 41).

The third and final option for thinking about and describing the 'realism' experienced by the *Dallas* viewers is to Ang the most satisfactory and this is 'emotional realism' (Ang 1985:45). For Ang, whereas the other two definitions of 'realism' are defined by what she calls a 'cognitive-rationalistic idea', 'emotional realism' allows the space for another level of engagement (Ang 1985:45).

> But the realism experience of the *Dallas* quoted bears no relation to this cognitive level – it is situated at the emotional level: what is recognized as real is not knowledge of the world, but a subjective experience of the world: a 'structure of feeling' (Ang 1985: 45).

Thus, as Ang goes on to describe what impacts most with the *Dallas* fans who participated in her study, are the emotions which are a central part of the experience of watching. I will argue that the data demonstrates, they were key ways in which realism and authenticity were established for the participants, via the use of shared experience and affectivity. However, I will also show there were also significant moments when this was disrupted for some participants too and I will argue that far from being 'disconnected from everyday life and reality' (Parsemain 2016:90), it was the inclusion of the ordinary and mundane which added to the sense of reality and authenticity which was necessary for participants to become involved with the programmes.

Realism, experience, authenticity and affect in the data

In chapter 3 I began to illustrate how a sense of realism and authenticity was created within the programmes, sharing some of the instances where participants spoke about their personal experiences and emotional engagement with what they had seen. In this next section I will explore the data further, continuing the analysis. I will show that there were instances of 'referential viewing' which took the reality of the programme for granted, but alongside this there were plenty of occasions on which 'critical viewing' was evident, particularly in relation to the use of history in *The Fires of Pompeii*. For the most part, what the data revealed was the way in which the modalities of viewing were fluid within the discussion groups, with particular moments in the televisual text providing occasions for the participants to experience the texts as realistic, relatable and authentic.

An extended excerpt from the first panel discussion in Leicester provides a pathway into the data and the discussion of realism and authenticity. In reading this it is helpful to know, 'the kitten things' which are mentioned, are a basket of cute, interspecies offspring.

What did you think of the, the the two very different worlds which were portrayed in the episodes? **(Interviewer: LE1)**

They're very old and very new. **(Interviewee 3: LE1)**

Mm. (**Interviewer: LE1)**

The very old that is kind of based on reality *(laughter)* (**Interviewee 2: LE1)**

It's based on a historical event (**Interviewee 3: LE1)**

And 'erm the, I, I don't know if this was purposeful, I think it possibly was 'erm I did GCSE Latin at school, Cambridge Latin course and they have a family; Caecilius, Metella and Quintus who admittedly dies in, when Pompeii, when Vesuvius erupts and, Caecilius was a banker not anything to do with 'erm, 'erm marble but I, I don't know if that was the authors having a sort of, 'er the writers of the episode having a sort of, oh look, yes, in case you did Latin at school, let's bring the same family to us in name anyway. I liked that (**Interviewee 2: LE1)**

It was purposeful. I remember going like 'cos I did the same thing, I did Latin (**Interviewee 2: ok**) as well, those names sound awfully familiar, so I looked I up and, yeah they couldn't come up with a family so they just stole them from school Latin *(laughter).* (**Interviewee 3: LE1)**

And what about the world in the, in the future? What did people think about that?' (**Interviewer**: **LE1)**

That was apparently New York but I didn't notice any American accents? *(laughter)* (**Interviewee 5**: **LE1)**

Yes, but then there were cats (**Interviewee 2**: **LE1)**

That's true (**Interviewee 5**: **LE1)**

What kind of animal… cats. (**Interviewee 2**: **LE1)**

Well I guess it's the idea it's supposed to be New York but on a different planet so possibly the cultures carry across in the same way when they moved to a different planet (.) don't know *(laughter)* what, he said it was like the 15th (.) succession of New York so maybe it's now British New York. (**Interviewee 2**: **LE1)**

Yes, we've taken over. (**Interviewee 2**: **LE1)**

How about the rest of you? Do you (.) how did you find the, the world that was created in the two programmes? (**Interviewer: LE1)**

(4.59 – 5.06) *Inaudible comment* (**Interviewee 6: LE1)**

You had a lot of peril, I'm quite happy to be where I am now rather than in either of those situations so (.) mm. Not having seen Doctor Who ever before I thought it was a bit weird really; the world, the cats *(laughter)* the people, the big brain, the big head. I don't know, I think it was quite far-fetched maybe all of it. But the, the story developed in, in each of the worlds but yeah, I don't know if I bought it.' (**Interviewee 7: LE1)**

Present and observable in this segment of conversation are several different threads manifesting themselves in relation to the perception and processing of the programme viewed and its 'realism' and 'authenticity'. The first concerns the settings where the stories took place, which are defined succinctly to begin with as being 'very old and very new'. (It is noteworthy that this was echoed in a solidly pragmatic comment demonstrating complete awareness concerning the premise and structure of the programme in another panel group, where it was stated they would have to be different in order to fulfil the time-travelling aspect of the programme). On this occasion, the first statement is then clarified for *The Fires of Pompeii* in being 'based on reality' and further refined as 'based on a historical event'. This distinction between 'reality' and 'a historical event' is itself significant and will be examined later on in this chapter at greater length. It was, however, one of things which occasioned difficulty for a particular participant in relating to the narrative. In this segment, what is immediately

remarked on by two participants, is the use of the names of the family from the Cambridge Latin course, which two participants recognised. The first expresses uncertainty as to whether their use is deliberate but liked it; the second is certain that they have been used deliberately and even checked when the names were 'awfully familiar'. Her view, however, is a much more cynical one citing a lack of imagination resulting in their theft by the programme writer from 'school Latin'. The qualification of reality for *Gridlock* is that although it was 'apparently New, New York', as a participant who is American observes, 'I didn't notice any American accents?' This remark causes her fellow participants to laugh. An acknowledgement that while this is factually true, there were no American accents, it is not too disruptive for most of group to the creation of an alternate reality in the future in a science fiction genre programme. This is illustrated by the next comment, 'Yes, but then there were cats', noting a programme which depicts a feline/humanoid hybrid species is unlikely to represent authentic accents for New, New York. This is then followed Interviewee 3 trying to apply some reasonable explanation as to why there are no 'American accents' in 'New New York'. She even ventures a possible solution. The final participant to speak, who had not seen *Doctor Who* before, notes that what had struck her is the sense that she would not want to be 'in either of those situations', she found it 'a bit weird really' and 'quite far-fetched', ending with 'I don't know if I bought it'.

From this, the first discernible thread is that the settings of the programmes, the way they look and sound, matter in the appreciation of their realism and authenticity even when they are known to be science fiction. What is seen and heard is important beyond simple absorption of the narrative. This is a point which should not be overlooked, because often work on popular culture from a theological perspective has been critiqued for failing to treat film or television as visual mediums and for concentrating on the narrative as the only aspect which is important (Wright 2007). For the participant, who has not *seen Doctor Who* before, especially in relation to the futuristic world of *Gridlock*, it is hard to buy into the world because it is perceived by her as 'weird' and 'far-fetched'. Referential viewing, which is emotionally, psychologically involved is rendered difficult for her because the visual aspects of the *Gridlock* were too strange, too alien, too hard to relate to and this created a barrier for her to engagement with the

programme. Yet, the situation is more complicated than this because her answer starts with a statement which reveals exactly this kind of engagement with what she has seen, 'You had a lot of peril, I'm quite happy to be where I am now rather than in either of those situations…' The setting of *Gridlock* may not have seemed real, but the sense of danger was perceived as authentic provoking an affective response of relief at not being in that situation.

The second perceptible thread is that the participants are cognizant of the constructed nature of the programme and the worlds it is inhabiting, and of the expectations governing it. This is shown through the conversation on the absence of American accents in New, New York, alongside the cats who are a hybrid human/feline race in *Gridlock* and the discussion about the use of the family from the Cambridge Latin course in *The Fires of Pompeii*. For the American panel group member the people in New, New York lack the reality of an American accent; for one of her British counterparts a good explanation can be given for this, involving a change of planets and cultures and the length of time this New York is distant from the contemporary one. So, while acknowledging her fellow participant's input, she is, at least momentarily, taking the reality created in it seriously enough to give a reasoned answer. This acceptance of the constructed nature of the programmes can also be perceived in the exchange about the use of the family from the Cambridge Latin course. Here the writer of the episode has made a choice which draws attention to the fictional world of the narrative by using a (recognisable to some people) external element in it. For those who studied the Cambridge Latin course experience and affect are provoked through their use. The narrative strategy used here has produced a different kind of emotional connection as these two participants relate to the narrative and each other through a shared experience of learning Latin, even if, while one of them expresses enjoyment, the other is distinctly cynical about it.

A second excerpt from the same discussion group elucidates more of the threads woven into the fabric which creates authenticity and realism.

'…Erm I mean you have the interaction of the family when they're erm, you're not going out wearing that to the girl in the later scene and things like that tied in to real life as far as Doctor Who can ever be real I think. Erm the way they, they, it's not entirely (.) fantasy. (**Interviewee 2: LE1**)

Something the viewer can relate to. (**Interviewee 1: LE1**)

The kitten things. (**Interviewee 2: LE1**)

Yeah, exactly. You had the family and then you had the new couple that were just married and had a new baby and then you had the older, the two women, older couple who have been married forever and ever and ever and just like completely normal with each other so I think all those are very, you know, normal within fantasy (.) snapshots. (**Interviewee 3: LE1**)

Mm. How about the rest of you? (**Interviewer: LE1**)

I mean, in the first one you have the, the lad coming in with a hangover. I think most of us have sort of experienced that and dad clapping his hands in front of you. It kind of, it kind of make you think well, I've been there, it kind of makes you feel like you could be in that situation even though both of them were completely (.) fantasy situations that are not going to happen, particularly *(laughter)*.' (**Interviewee 4: LE1**).

There is a strong sense of what constitutes 'normal' (at least within fantasy) in the comments made by Interviewee 3, and the long-standing lesbian couple, 'who have been married forever and ever and ever' and are completely comfortable with each other are part of that 'normal', together with an interspecies couple with their 'kitten' progeny. Alongside this, there is also an awareness that the programme is using this string of snapshots to create a sense of 'reality' in a futuristic setting, but that this is also providing an opportunity for emotional connection and recognition of shared experience is also vital.

‘Emotional Realism’ (Ang 1985)

In the next section of this chapter I continue discussing these strands concerning ‘realism’ in dialogue with Ang’s research on *Dallas* (Ang 1985) and a piece by Fiona Hobden, ‘History Meets Fiction in Doctor Who, ‘The Fires of Pompeii’ (Hobden 2009). Hobden reflects on the Roman world which is created in the episode (and the supplementary material produced by the BBC on its website and through the *Doctor Who Confidential* strand of programming), placing it in the context of wider filmic and televisual representations of this era. She highlights the developing history of these representations, their relationship with each other and with contemporary academic understandings.

One of the main points Hobden makes is the way in which a programme like *The Fires of Pompeii* and its reception ‘can foster a critical appreciation of history in their audience’ (Hobden 2009:149)

> Contrary to popular conceptions and student expectations, ancient Rome was not a real place we could visit, if only we had a time-machine (or TARDIS). Rather it is the malleable, increasingly nuanced, and ever-changing product of our imaginative engagement with surviving sources: written and visual texts that discuss or represent the ancient world. Reading the ‘The Fires of Pompeii’ in its multi-media context, where the processes of Rome’s construction as a space and society are laid bare, fosters an understanding of the artificial, constructed, and contested nature of the past. (Hobden 2009:149)

The constructed nature of the Roman world in *The Fires of Pompeii* episode and its realism, or perceived lack thereof, in terms of representation were a factor in the way in which several of the participants across the panels made connections with their own lives and experience. In the fourth panel group in North London there was a direct acknowledgement that history was being ‘played with’ and that this was uncomfortable viewing for one participant who was a history graduate.

‘Yeah, what did you think about that kind of recreation of, of the past? (**Interviewer: ED4**)

I have to treat it as fiction and try not to care too much about it because otherwise it’s really annoying *(laughter)*. (**Interviewee 4: ED4**)

Okay can you say a bit more about that? (**Interviewer: ED4**)

Erm (.) I’m a history graduate so looking at Roman history and seeing it not necessarily, seeing it played with I have to accept that it’s being played with and that it’s not history (Interviewer: ok) so I find the futuristic ones perhaps sometimes easier because they’re definitely just stories.’ (**Interviewee 4: ED4**)

What is significant for this section on meaning-making is that a little later in the same panel group discussion, (after another participant has noted that *Doctor Who* has visited the Roman world before and indeed, used the same kind of storyline, ‘so both stories are set fire to things and destroy things’, (**Interviewee 1: ED4**), the conversation continues,

‘That’s interesting, isn’t it? They’re based on fact. Both things really did happen in history (Interviewer: mm) albeit it may not have been, didn’t look authentic. (**Interviewee 3: ED4**)

I know it’s not going to look authentic but yeah. (**Interviewee 4:ED4**)

Its lack of authenticity did worry me too but then I thought well it is probably a low budget TV thing. (**Interviewee 3: ED4**)

Here, Interviewee 4, who has previously stated that she finds the recreation of the past ‘really annoying’ and she has to ‘treat it as fiction and not care too much about it’ is also stating that she knows ‘it’s not going to look authentic’; so what is it which provokes the sense of annoyance? It did not become clear during the panel discussion if it was the way in which the narrative inserted the Doctor into an historical event, making him central to

it or, if was the other things, like the cockney stall holder and the portrayal of anachronistic family relationships. What was obvious was that things which had helped other participants engage with this historical storyline, were problematic for her.

This 'playing with' history by the re-booted *Doctor Who* has been commented on by those working on the programme academically. Hills notes 'the family interactions in 'The Fires of Pompeii' (4:2) may be, in part, stereotyped versions of 2008 identities', however, he argues that there is also value to the what Lawrence Miles has labelled 'time-tourism' in the series because they have 'researched details about their respective time period' and portray 'specific elements of the social milieux'(Hills 2010:109). These comments appear as part of a longer piece on the significance of time travel in the new *Doctor Who*, the use of genre and the role of emotion. Here, Hills asserts that in contrast to the earlier series, the series now makes use of its previous public service remit for education and uses it as a means to mark itself out as a 'quasi-brand' (Hills 2010). Like the participant, its use of history has caused concern, occasioning comment about the way in which history is rewritten or rendered in a reductive fashion to the 'present in costume…without…historical particularity' (Lawrence Miles cited by Hills 2010:109) and 'offering contemporary entertainment rather than education' (Hills 2010:108). Crucially for this chapter, Hills argues that the way in which the new *Who* uses time-travel fits in with developments in television industry in the twenty-first century including 'a 'close-up focus on emotion and characters' private lives' which brings it closer to 'soap drama' and the use of 'emotional realism' (Hills 2010: 111).

Doctor Who is a significantly different programme from *Dallas* in a number of ways; it is a long-standing and thoroughly British production from the science-fiction rather than soap opera genre and therefore, it does not aim to reflect a knowable reality. It is aired on Saturdays in the early evenings and is often classified as family entertainment or even a children's programme (although this is vociferously contested by several participants in the research). Despite these differences, however, as Hills has argued (2010) Ang's concept of 'emotional realism' (1985) does now have a place when thinking about the new series. It is certainly the case that it holds some traction with the responses of the

participants in this study. Furthermore, they demonstrate awareness of this in their conversation. The following lengthy extract from the first panel group in Leicester, continues the conversation from the question about the different worlds which was referred to earlier. It illustrates the way in which different participants made emotional connections with the programmes they saw.

'So thinking about the kind of recreation of those worlds (Interviewee 2: mm) 'erm (.) were there things that you could empathise with? Are they, you know, particularly those people who haven't watched Doctor Who before, were there things that, that you could empathise with in the programme? (**Interviewer: LE1**)

All of them stuck in a traffic jam *(laughter).* (**Interviewee 1: LE1**)

Yes not most of the, most of the country haven't been set on by an exploding volcano. 'Erm I mean you have the interaction of the family when they're 'erm, you're not going out wearing that to the girl in the later scene and things like that tied in to real life as far as Doctor Who can ever be real I think. 'Erm the way, they, they, it's not entirely (.) fantasy. (**Interviewee 2: LE1**)

Something the viewer can relate to (**Interviewee 1: LE1**)

Yes. (**Interviewee 2: LE1**)

There were the family snapshots from both of them 'cos even like the cars in Gridlock. (**Interviewee 3: LE1**)

The kitten things. (**Interviewee 2: LE1**)

Yeah exactly. You had the family and then you had the new couple that were just married and had a new baby and then you had you know the older, the two women, older couple who've been married for like ever and ever and ever and just like completely normal with each other so I think all those are very, you know, normal within fantasy (.) snapshots. (**Interviewee 3: LE1**)

Mm. How about the rest of you? (**Interviewer: LE1**)

> I mean, in the first one you have the, the lad coming in with a hangover. I think most of us have sort of experienced that and dad clapping his hands in front of you. It kind of, it kind of makes you think well, I've been there, it kind of makes you feel like you could be in that situation even though both of them were completely (.) fantasy situations that are not going to happen, particularly *(laughter).* (**Interviewee 4: LE1**)

This section of data highlights a number of ways in which the participants in the first panel group in Leicester made emotional connections with the episodes they seen. It reveals what it is for the participants which contributes to that sense of believability, within the science fiction setting. For Interviewee 1 it would appear to be an entirely mundane, ordinary life-experience, amongst laughter from his fellow participants he names as the thing with which he can empathise, 'all of them stuck in a traffic jam'. Meanwhile, he and Interviewees 2 and 3, all allude, in answering the question about empathy, to the family and relational 'snapshots' which form an important part of the narrative and the creation of a sense of 'real life' or 'normal' life within 'fantasy'. The participants are aware in this conversation that these elements elicit an emotional response to the programmes, and of the role they play in establishing a sense of 'emotional realism' in the context of the science-fiction genre.

Doctor Who is a science fiction series, so gritty realism of the sort associated with particular strands of television drama or film is not its genre; nevertheless there were comments which lamented a lack of 'realism'; so, as noted earlier, a participant remarking 'I'm an astrophysicist' and she was annoyed by the bangs in science fiction programmes like Doctor Who because there are no bangs in space! There were, also, participants questioning the cockney accent of a character ostensibly from ancient Pompeii, to another mentioned previously admitting she found it difficult when episodes were in historic setting and history was 'played' with. This meant she preferred the episodes set in the future. Equally, there were die-hard fans, whose standards of authenticity were about whether or not the narratives fitted with their concepts of 'a good episode' or note were ones which took the history of *Doctor Who* itself seriously. Significantly, the participants did not express the exasperation with the

the future world which Hills identifies as a 'recurrent fan complaint' regarding the new *Who*; that 'depictions of the future in the series have not been 'proper' science-fictional extrapolations from contemporary society' (Hills 2010:91). This critique picks up on exactly what is happening with the participants reactions but is unhappy with it. This is because,

> Rather than present-day identities being defamiliarized, they seem to be projected, as is, into far-future narrative settings (Hills 2010:91).

Hill argues that new *Who* draws on a number of different 'hybridised' genre types for its narrative strategy as a time-travel series, using science-fiction, comedy, romance, adventure and 'soap-drama' to create a series suitable for the twenty-first century (Hills 2010:105). It is the use of 'soap-drama' which brings to the fore the relationships between the characters, allowing space for emotion and concentrating on the personal and private, rather than the public and political (Hills 2010).

> In the re-imagining of *Who*, time travel is thereby given a new found 'emotional realism' (Hills 2010:100).

Hills uses Ang's phrase 'emotional realism' and her work on Dallas, to articulate the way in which though the situations shown, the people portrayed are at one level 'unrealistic'; at the psychological and emotional level they are 'recognizable' (ibid). Thus where authenticity and realism, in terms of portraying life as it *is* or more particularly as it is perceived, came to the fore was in connection to participants' own life experience or perception of how things are in the world and their emotional engagement, authenticity and affectivity. At a very basic level this was expressed by the participants identifying with the narrative in *Gridlock* because of the 'felt' experience of what it is like to be in a traffic jam; or appreciating the scene in which the Doctor descends through all the trapped Volkswagen caravanette type vehicles to rescue Martha and each one has a tiny vignette of life which the people who are trapped have

created. There were also comments concerning the Father and Mother in *The Fires of Pompeii* favouring one child over another, holding one up as an exemplar, or the reaction to the son's behaviour when he comes in the worse for wear (we've all had that experience) and how that was like family life, or at the end of the episode, the Father saying 'You're not going out like that are you' to the daughter when she has a short skirt on. But this 'emotional realism' also went further, with questions of affectivity, morality and power intertwined at the end of the episode *The Fires of Pompeii* in the reactions to the one family who are saved while the rest of Pompeii is destroyed. Participants were glad that the family were saved, and the end of the episode was lifted from the grimness of the death and destruction of the city and its people. They wanted this to happen and yet, they were aware of a jarring affect, moving to the happy lives of the family saved who were now worshipping the Doctor and Donna as household gods, while in the background so many others had died. Alongside this, there were also comments about the power the Doctor exercised and the way in which Donna chose to share that responsibility with him.

Religious imagery and affect

This leads on to a further aspect of the significant category of *affect*. It relates to another of the key categories to emerge, which was the way in which participants responded to what I have labelled 'explicit' religious imagery and content. It also includes the way in which they made use themselves of religious and theological language, even if not in a religious or theological context. During its long history, *Doctor Who* has been acknowledged as a programme that 'has made conscious use of religious themes and imagery'; Andrew Crome, in his discussion of 'Implicit Religion' in relation to *Doctor Who,* asserts that 'with the return of the series in 2005 the use of overt religious imagery became more pronounced (Chrome 2013a and 2015:444). This use of religious imagery and themes both in the original series and in the new updated one, has received significant attention in the academic arena which relates specifically to *Doctor Who* including a whole volume *Time and Relative Dimensions in Faith: Religion and Doctor* edited by Chrome and McGrath (2013), and other journal articles and comment pieces in newspapers (Amy-Chinn 2010; Green 2010; Kelly 2011; Liebovitz 2013; Wynne-Jones 2008).

In the fourth panel discussion in North London, the view that there was now more use of religion was voiced, although more in relation to the Steven Moffatt/Matt Smith era, than the Russell T. Davies/David Tennant one.

> 'But it also seemed like they're bringing religion more into Doctor Who especially with the new Doctor, with 'erm 'er Matt Smith. 'Er a lot of the 'erm episodes have had clerics and bishops and a lot of Christian references.' (**Interviewee 3: ED4**)

Crome identifies both the episodes chosen for this study (years before his chapter was written!), *Gridlock* and *The Fires of Pompeii*, alongside others to evidence his point concerning religious content. He uses the particular instances, of hymn singing and the Doctor and Donna becoming 'Household Gods', which will be discussed first in this chapter, as examples of 'overt' religious content (Crome 2015:444ff).

The appearance and participative singing of two traditional Christian hymns in *Gridlock* has provoked much consequent discussion concerning with what purpose and intent they were employed (Davies 2010). In the panel groups it elicited discussion too. In the first panel group in Leicester, which was a predominantly non-Christian, no faith or other faith group, no comment arose concerning their use until a direct question was posed.

> 'What did you make of the use of the hymns (.) in *Gridlock*? (**Interviewer: LE1**)
>
> They made me cringe actually (Interview 3: yeah) but (Interviewer: ok) especially when the people started crying, or not all of them but some, even Martha, she was just, hearing them sing for the first time and suddenly she was that touched 'erm.' (**Interviewee 2: LE1**)

In this instance the reaction was strong, immediate and physical by one participant; she followed up her initial comment a minute later in the conversation with:

> ‘Yeah the hymn bit was a bit too much for me. I thought that the first time I saw it as well, it was just (.) too much corny the whole time (.) touching me that much ‘erm maybe I’m, maybe we’re going back to the heart of stone, maybe that’s me, I wouldn’t be overly surprised. ‘Erm but no, that that bit ‘erm I couldn’t.’ (**Interviewee 2: LE1**)

> ...kind of like at 4 o'clock every afternoon they have, what they sing that? They just, they all gather around their screens and their cars...all sing? I was like, I can’t, I can’t deal with all that.’ (**Interviewee 3: LE1**)

For these two women, there was a strong response of discomfort expressed to the whole presentation of a community of people stopping and singing hymns together at a particular time. This response included several strands, ranging from physical reactions, ‘they made me cringe’; to affective responses or the perceived lack thereof, ‘maybe we’re going back to the heart of stone’ (referring to the participant’s earlier self-description in the conversation) and mental wrestling, ‘I was like, I can’t, I can’t deal with all that’ and ‘too much’, ‘it was just (.) too much corny the whole time’.
The affective response to the emotion portrayed in the programme during the hymn singing, has two distinct identifiable elements which are nevertheless connected; first, it relates to the feelings which are shown by the characters when the hymns are sung, ‘people started crying…even Martha…suddenly she was touched’ and second, it elicits scepticism in these two participants, one unable to relate to everyone sharing collectively in this ritual of singing at the same time each day and the other because, the hymn-singing is ‘too corny’ to provoke the reaction it does in Martha, the character. The emotional content of what happened on screen does not strike a chord with these two participants, it makes them uncomfortable and is deemed to be ‘too much’.

These very forceful negative responses to the hymns were not, however, universal across the panel discussion groups. In the second group in Leicester, which also consisted of a majority of participants who were by their own self-designation non-Christian, no faith or another faith, a more general question about the music in the episode elicited a positive comment about liking the 'the use of the, the old ... music in *Gridlock*'. Then further, that its use augments the moment when the Doctor is speaking about his home planet Gallifrey. Here, there is a positive affective response to the use of a hymn at the end of the programme, when those who are trapped have been set free by the Doctor and fly to freedom in a blue sky, while the hymn is sung and the Doctor makes his confession to Martha about what happened on his home planet. Again, in this second panel group in Leicester when a more direct question was asked, it elicited this response:

> 'You certainly get that, that powerful scene 'erm where (.) the woman's kind of realised that everything's gone wrong and there's no one there to help and then all of sudden the hymn kicked in and it's almost, it's like togetherness and they're all like well, it's alright, it's going to be fine 'erm and then it's nice that it gets echoed at the end when everything really is fine and it's almost like, yeah, them sticking together … holds them in, tied in to that, that community that they had in *Gridlock*.' (**Interviewee 3: LE2)**

But, the ensuing short discussion in this panel group discloses a wide spectrum of engagement with the hymns in *Gridlock*. Here, as in the other Leicester group, the conversation turned to the emotion portrayed and whereas there had been quite a positive appreciation of the emotion and hope, a degree of scepticism and suspicion starts to be articulated.

> 'My first thought was that it was 'erm signalling …brainwashing tune'. (**Interviewee 2: LE2**)

> Yeah I thought but then they got really emotional and I was like, maybe not being forced to **(Interviewee F: LE2**)
>
> But initially that's probably what people think (**Interviewee 2: LE2**)
>
> I guess in a sense it was though, wasn't it, you know, 'cos they, they all knew they were going …and, yeah and they just were like, oh no, we don't talk about that…we'll just plod on and get on with it, it almost was like brainwashing.' (**Interviewee 3: LE2**)

Here, in a small section of conversation two different responses to the role of religion, (as portrayed in the narrative through the singing of traditional Christian hymns), are exhibited; on the one hand, it offers solace and creates community for those facing an intractable, seemingly unending situation so that they can continue living; on the other, it is 'brainwashing' which encourages those who are trapped to think 'we'll just plod on'. Here again, emotion plays a part and so it is unclear for one person whether it is 'brainwashing' or not because the display of emotion by the characters seems in their mind to preclude it being 'forced'. As with the reactions from the first Leicester group discussed earlier, for those who participated in this section of discussion, 'emotion' and 'power' were an important part of their response. For one participant, who was not sure about the song being a hymn, there was a tentative link to it being a nationalistic or patriotic song. There is also a recognition of the hope and community created, 'togetherness', which is inspired for desperate and disparate characters, trapped in their circumstances and yet, able to sing together. But this is alongside an anxiety about who is precipitating this within the narrative; the question is it 'brainwashing?' demonstrates concern about the power dynamics of what is shown. There was also conversation around whether those from other cultures watching *Doctor Who* would be able to pick up on this reference, showing an awareness of the culturally conditioned nature of hymn singing.

In one of the predominantly Christian groups which took place in Cambridge, participants while able to recognise the hymns, were willing and able to articulate that

there may ways to read the use and inclusion of the hymns which were not positive. Indeed, they could perceive that this could be true of the whole arc of the narrative, and that the writer them self may have multiple intentions.

> 'Yeah 'erm (.) and he, and of course you could take the second one in different ways. You could say that they were being (.) cynical about, about 'er religious people because here are these silly people listening to these hymns and crying 'erm and you see The Doctor's face and he looks sad for them…But, but that's (.) you know you could take it that way or you could take it if you wanted to totally the opposite way and say that he, he's written it as 'erm (.) a metaphor for (.) salvation through sacrifice. (**Interviewee 2: WH3**)

> I wonder if there's a bit of both because I got the, I got the impression that he was, there was some comment being made about the placebo effect of religion in the 'erm singing of the hymn and, the assistant says, you've got your faith and I've got The Doctor who of course saved the day and they, and they were making a very strong distinction between them but on the other hand I think there was also this very, very strong sense of self-sacrifice being, so I think, I think there's probably both of these things going on not just one or the other.' (**Interviewee 7: WH3**).

These self-identified Christian participants are able to recognise, and willing to admit that the hymn singing may have been included because the writer was being 'cynical about, about 'er religious people'; that it was showing those listening to the hymns and responding emotionally by 'crying' as 'silly'. Significantly, for the person speaking it is the Doctor's reaction on screen to the hymn singing which suggests this because 'he looks sad for them…' (Interviewee 2: WH3). For the other speaker, there is a 'distinction' made in the narrative between the 'faith' of those singing the hymns in 'religion', which in the end is simply a placebo, effecting no change, and the faith expressed in the Doctor by Martha, which is shown to be completely reasonable as he saves the day. This is juxtaposed with 'a strong sense of self-sacrifice' which means, for this speaker at least, the place of belief (Christian?) is not altogether dismissed.

The participants also demonstrate sensitivity concerning the way in which issues of power and emotion can be manipulated via religious practice, even to the issue of causing offence when depicting the ancient practice of religion in a humorous way by subverting the Roman household gods with clay models of the Doctor and Donna.

In this chapter, using the empirical data, I have further examined the category which included realism, affect, experience and authenticity. I have shown how these codes are both related and complementary and therefore, why they are connected together here. I have worked with various dialogue partners to assert that the creation and reception of a sense of realism and authenticity for the participants rests in large part on the use of shared experience (both with the programmes and within the group) and affective engagement with the content of the programmes. I have also explored how and when this is disrupted for particular participants, identifying what occasioned this for them. I have used the work of Parsemain (2016) on learning through television, and specifically here concept of critical involvement, arguing this fits well with the viewing position revealed by the participants. Whilst they were emotionally engaged by what they watched, they also evidenced the ability to be remain critical, particularly demonstrating awareness of the constructed nature of the programmes, even while being drawn into the narrative. I have used the work of Hills (2010) and Ang (1985) to look at the concept of 'emotional realism' and how important this was for the participants. I then explored how these did (and did not) function with the data gathered here. I have shown that the religious imagery used, in the form of the use of hymns, had for some participants was a negative affective experience. I have also reflected on the way in which even the predominantly Christian participants were able to articulate a less than positive perspective on the use of hymns.

A vital part of the construction of the realism of the programmes for the participants was the role of affect, their connection (or not) to the emotional landscape of what was going on, their acceptance of the world which was created as authentic to their experience. The data shows the importance of emotional authenticity and the role of affect in contemporary culture; the realism which is shaped and portrayed in the science-fictional time-travelling world of *Doctor Who* relies on this within the

narratives. Todd Comer in ‘How the Doctor’s Non-Domesticity Interrupts History’ (2010) uses John Fiske’s argument about realism; a television programme is realistic ‘because it reproduces the dominant senses of reality…’ (Fiske cited by Comer 2010: 44).

> Realism is not a matter of fidelity to an empirical reality, but of the discursive conventions by which and for which a sense of reality is constructed. (ibid).

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Chapter Five

Power

> Science fiction has the potential to offer something new in terms of gender representation. This does not mean it always delivers on this potential (Jowett 2014: 77).

In this chapter I will examine in more depth the category of power, considering first *gender* as the leading code under this heading and then working briefly with subsequent codes of moral/ethical choice and the language used to describe the character and motivation of the Doctor as a continuing and complementary part of the argument. Using the data and dialogue partners from recent academic work on gender in *Doctor Who*, I will argue that the empirical data affirms the emerging concerns in academic work with the limitations of the role of the companion and the gendered portrayal. I will also highlight some interesting areas of disparity. Finally, I will examine the way in which the data reveals gendered stereotypes operating not just within the narrative but also, in the interpretation by the participants. The main dialogue partner I will work with is Lorna Jowett and particularly her article, 'The Girls Who Waited? Female Companions and Gender in *Doctor Who*' (2014).

Why gender?

When making the case for studying the way in which media, gender and identity relate Gauntlett notes while 'media and communications are a central element of modern life, gender and sexuality remain at the core of how we think about our identities' (Gauntlett 2008:1). Since the announcement the new Doctor was going to be played by a female actor there has been an enormous amount of media and fan attention devoted to this significant change in the programme's sixty-five-year history (Jowett 2014). Many of the articles on *gender* in *Doctor Who* note that what makes it an interesting subject to review and reflect on is the very fact the series is so long running and has therefore had

to make adjustments to the culture in which it is produced and received. Richard Wallace in his article offering 'A Feminist Perspective of *Doctor Who*' states the following commesnt from Nicholas Cull 'remains as true as it ever has' (Wallace 2010: 102),

> that the programme's "sustained popularity…provides the cultural historian with a window on the culture that created and embraced it (Wallace 2010: 102).

Given the ongoing importance of gender to identity and the ways in which understandings of gender have changed and been contested over recent decades, it is not surprising then that the empirical data from the panel groups watching an earlier incarnation of the Doctor, produced as one of the significant codes that of 'gender'. What emerges is that although the programme may have made efforts 'to address changing attitudes to gender', gender stereotyping remained a prominent part of the viewer's experience (Jowett 2014: 78). What is also apparent, however, is this is not just about what is represented in the programme but how it is received and interpreted through the participants' own perspectives, which are not always straightforward.

It should be noted that unlike Craig Haslop's empirical research on *Torchwood* (BBC series; spin-off from *Doctor Who* shown in post-watershed timeslot) and issues of sexuality and identity (in which because of the nature of the study it was deemed ethically essential to make participants aware of the subject of the research), for this study, participants were not told the focus of the research, other than that two episodes of *Doctor Who* would be shown and that they would be asked to take part in a group discussion afterwards (Haslop 2013). As has been explained earlier, this was to avoid the possibility of skewing the responses in a particular direction because of the way in which academic work on media from a religious and theological viewpoint has been charged with discovering what it desires to in texts and not paying sufficient attention to the other ways, more 'mundane' ways in which they could be understood, interpreted and used (Lynch 2009). By not revealing the focus of the study it was hoped every opportunity would be given for the subject matter to be guided by the participants

responses and conversation. Thus, the discussion of the relationship between the Doctor and his companion arose naturally, often as a result of asking an initial about the main characters.

It is also helpful at this stage to establish how the word 'gender' is being used in relation to the empirical data, although the full content of what it meant and the way in which it was used by the participants will only become clear as what they said in response to the programmes they saw is reviewed. In her definition of terms for her essay on 'Meaning-Making and Ideologies of Gender and Sexuality' (2014), Sally McConnell-Gilet makes the point that 'gender and sexuality are intimately intertwined' (McConnell-Gilet 2014: 319). She goes on to give four different ways in which gender has been characterised;

> … gender build on (1) sexual categorisation of people, with genital, chromosomal, and hormonal criteria sorting into male and female; (2) sexual encounters, especially potentially reproductive ones; (3) sexual reproduction, which creates infant humans; (4) subsequent rearing of the children produced (ibid: 319).

She also points out, however, that gender includes the 'conceptual baggage' (ibid: 318) that goes with these things as they are worked out through the reality of life as it is lived within given 'cultural practices and values' which can differ enormously over 'time and space' and between different societies (ibid: 319). In the context of this study, the term 'gender' is being used in this way, to encompass not simply a description of biological sex (which as McConnell-Gilet states is not necessarily as 'straightforward' or 'dichotomizing' as it is often taken to be (ibid: 310)). 'Gender' is being used here to include the 'conceptual baggage' that binary definitions of male/female and masculinity/femininity have accumulated in post-war British culture with the emergence of second and third wave feminism and moves toward equality between the sexes.

Power, Gender, The Doctor and *his* companions: An Introduction to recent literature

> I have a confession to make…I never wanted to be a companion. I wanted to be the Doctor (Elizabeth Bear cited in Coile 2013:83)

In this section I will bring the empirical data, which I coded as coming under the heading of *gender* and within the category of *power*, into dialogue with recent scholarly work on gender in *Doctor Who*. Much of this work has been written since this research started and the literature review completed. It is salient to note, therefore, that they were not accessed until after the coding was done, and the codes and categories had emerged.

Lorna Jowett acknowledges that when she wrote 'an earlier version of this article' in 2012, she 'discovered a surprising gap in the academic literature of *Doctor Who* around gender' (Jowett 2014:77). She contrasts this to the American programme, *Star Trek*, another long running science fiction series originating in the 1960s and enduring through 'spin-offs and reboots' which 'has long been analysed in terms of gender' (ibid). Jowett suggests several explanations for this lack; that *Doctor Who* itself does not have the same 'utopian' outlook as *Star Trek* which informs its representation, that academic scholarship on *Doctor Who* has only started 'gaining momentum' 'in the last five years' and that earlier books by Newman (2005) and Chapman (2006) and 'more recent monographs' such as those by Hills (2010) and Britton (2011) 'take a broad approach' and consequently do not 'analyse gender in detail' (ibid). Tulloch's earlier work on audience reception 'likewise only touches on gender issues as part of a wider study of reception and fandom' (Jowett 2014: 77). The more recent work which Jowett goes on to list will be used alongside hers, as the data on gender is considered here. As she identifies the majority of this work concentrates on the companions, who are 'almost exclusively female' (Jowett 2014: 78). According to Jowett, work on masculinity is only just starting to appear and is mostly focussed on 'how audiences for the reboot have challenged male-dominated fandom in the United Kingdom' (ibid). Her

article of is of particular interest in relation to the data because its intention is to look at 'how the reboot tries to make its representations culturally relevant as well as acceptable to contemporary audiences' (Jowett 2014: 79). A range of work on the companions is beginning to accumulate (e.g. Barron 2010; Cherry 2013; McLaughlin 2010; Robinson 2010 Wallace 2013). They express a variety of views about the way in the post 2005 re-boot has sought to update the representation of the companion appropriately for a contemporary audience, also examining the way in which the programme-makers have sought to address the charge that the earlier classic series (1963-89) portrayal of the companions as 'short-skirted screamers' (McLaughlin 2010), was 'sexist' (Wallace 2013). While recent scholarship expresses some support for these changes having been successful, with McLaughlin asserting the companion has now been framed 'as a tough woman in a dynamic relationship that changes the Doctor as much as herself'; I will argue that in several important ways Jowett's stance, that the reboot of *Doctor Who* still had significant shortcomings in its representation of women through the role of the companion, is observable from the data (McLaughlin 2010:120 and Jowett 2014).

Power, Gender, The Doctor and *his* companions: the data

Having introduced Jowett's work and her survey of the recent literature, I will turn now to the empirical data. As has been indicated, the initial question in each discussion group was about the main characters in the episodes. It was used to put the participants at their ease, as even those who had not seen *Doctor Who* before could identify the Doctor and his companions from the two episodes they had just seen. This was then followed up by a question about the nature of the relationship between these characters. Various responses were elicited to this follow-up question ranging from, 'well they've got a lot of trust' in the first Leicester group, through 'it's a complicated relationship…' in the second Leicester group, to 'he seems to be teaching, trying to (.) teach them something', in the group from Cambridge. This extract from the fourth panel group in North London concisely captures the appreciation of an imbalance in the Doctor/companion relationship.

‘I thought there seemed to be a more of an unequal relationship in the second sequence. (**Interviewee 2: ED4)**

….

I thought the second sequence (.) he was ‘erm (.) didn’t respect her (**Interviewer**: mm) and ‘erm (.) was more than churlish towards her (**Interviewer:** mm) particularly as the episode drew to a close.’ (**Interviewee 3: ED4**)

Even with these first reactions to the question about the relationship between the Doctor and his companion, the range of what was articulated can be appreciated; that this a relationship which necessitates ‘trust’, in which one character appears to be ‘teaching’ the other, a relationship which is perceived as both ‘complicated’ and ‘unequal’, to the point where for one participant in *Gridlock* says the Doctor shows a lack of ‘respect’ and was even ‘churlish’ towards his companion.

When I used the question about the characters and the relationship between them, I had not expected the strong response I received. It was clear from the analysis of the ensuing panel group discussions that conversation concerning the relationship between the Doctor and his companions (in the case of these episodes Martha and Donna) demonstrated a strong sense of the power dynamics at play in the representation of this male/female relationship, alongside the use of particular tropes for male/female characteristics and behaviour which revealed both things which the participants saw in the episodes, and expectations and cultural structures which they were bringing into the room with them and using in their interpretation and meaning-making. The two examples below serve to illustrate these points further.

First from the third panel group in Cambridge:

‘It’s quite a (.) traditional male female pairing in that they always rely on him to get them out of trouble (**Interviewer**: mm) he’s the one that knows what to do

> and he's the one that can control (**Interviewee** 2:mm) when they come back shouting, crying and worrying. (**Interviewee 7**: **WH3)**
>
> A bit sexist in a way.' (**Interviewee 1**:**WH3)**

The second from the first panel group in Leicester:

> 'Yeah, Donna seems more on the same level as the Doctor whereas Martha's kind of looking up to him a bit more. (**Interviewee M**: **LE1)**
>
> Mm and I think with Donna as well she was a, obviously able to influence what he was going to do, in the *Fires of Pompeii* episode clearly he was just going to go 'erm but she, you know, she actually influenced him to, to go back and he saved all four of them.' (**Interviewee 4: LE1)**

The relationship between the Doctor and *his companion* is here posited as 'quite traditional'; this is then described in terms of him being the one who is reliable, resourceful, in the role of rescuer and exercising power and authority. The Doctor is seen to be inhabiting a traditionally masculine space with the accompanying expectations about his behaviour and demeanour. Meanwhile, the companion, who in both these episodes is female (as in much of the *Doctor Who* oeuvre), is characterised as 'shouting, crying and worrying' and relying on the Doctor 'to get them out of trouble', which are more typically attributed as feminine qualities. Martha and Donna are contrasted as companions and because Donna is seen to be able to 'influence' the Doctor she is viewed as 'more on the same level'. This is not by any means a universally shared opinion by the participants as can be seen here in conversation from the fourth panel group in North London, when a Donna and Martha are compared negatively in the opposite direction:

> ‘I think because she (.) I think ‘cos she tended to shout and strop to get her own way and I, it annoys me that the characters isn’t allowed to use their brain more (**Interviewer:** mm) whereas as Martha is (.) far more savvy and it, to me it always felt like a big step forward from the companions which you said happened in the much earlier ones in the ‘70s and ‘80s, I think it happened between, when you got Martha that you suddenly got female characters who were allowed to be intelligent and be strong and have their own minds whereas I though Billie Piper’s character and Catherine Tate’s character and the one before that who I’ve forgotten were still far more in the old (.) sort of model of.’ (**Interviewee 4: ED4)**

What is shared across the panel groups is the sense the relationship between the Doctor and *his* companion is recognised as ‘a bit sexist’. This concurs with a point Jowett makes, using Britton’s work.

> *Doctor Who* may be structured around non-conformity personal liberty and individualism but these are valorised in the Doctor while companions tend to get more ‘normative treatment’ (Jowett 2014:79).

The participants were also aware of the way in which the re-booted series had altered things further by bringing the suggestion of romance into this relationship, whereas previously Jowett says, ‘the Doctor used to be, at least on the surface, asexual’ (Jowett 2014: 81). ‘They never seem to understand that they’re not dating him.’ (Interviewee 4: WH3). As has been noted earlier, this was not to the delight of a minority of participants, who believed it did not add anything to the series and were glad to have acknowledged as a ‘mistake’ by Russell T. Davies. Others were more accepting of what Barron calls ‘the progressive presence of sexual attraction between the female companion and the Doctor’ (Barron 2010: 131) and some even thought it was a deliberate ploy to increase female audiences. There were also similar reactions to those of Jowett as to impact this introduction of a romantic element to the relationship has had on the representation of women in the series. This was apparent in the comments below

which suggest for some participants Martha's story of unrequited love 'undercuts' her character (Jowett 2014: 82).

From the first panel group in Leicester:

> 'I always find Marth's 'erm (.) besottedness with the Doctor rather painful. I don't know if it's just the writing or something but …') (**Interviewee 4: LE1**).

From the second panel group in Leicester:

> 'You got it quite a lot in that second episode with Martha, she even described as the rebound girl and 'er how Doctor's not even decided that he needs her much yet, he's just showing her around…' (**Interviewee 3: LE2**).

This is especially foregrounded in fourth panel group in North London, with the comments quoted about the 'unequal relationship' between the Doctor and his companion. This 'unequal relationship' becomes more significant with Martha because it is linked with Martha's attraction to the Doctor, contrasting with Donna's dismissal of any possibility of a romantic relationship. One participant expressed disappointment at this treatment,

From the second panel group in Leicester:

> 'And that was a big shame for Martha's character as well, she was just a tag along…' (**Interviewee 3: LE2**).

This gives support to Jowett's assertion that this female character is 'undercut' by this aspect of her relationship with the Doctor.

> Given the potential Martha has, especially in terms of intersections of race, class and gender, this is disappointing (Jowett 2014: 82).

In relation to Jowett's comment, it is particularly worthy of note here that on not a single occasion was Martha's race referred to in the panel discussions. This has caused me to pause for reflection as to why this was the case. Ultimately, there is no way of answering this question satisfactorily now, however this does not invalidate the fact that it is significant. It could be put down to the constituency of the panel groups; their membership was virtually entirely white British except one participant who was from East Asian background and another who was Black British. Had this rendered race invisible in a way in which gender was not, for both male and female participants? The participants appear to have responded in the way Robinson characterises the series, where 'racial differences largely went ignored' (Robinson 2010:159). Reading his article, 'Agency, Action and Re-action: The Black Female Presence in *Doctor Who*', I became conscious I had replicated within the panel discussion groups the normative whiteness which Robinson remarks is 'a primary and normative feature of science fiction'? (Robinson 2010: 157). This does not invalidate the data on gender elicited from comments concerning Martha, but it does mean they need to be read in the knowledge that this is the case. It means it is important to hear the voices that were positive in their appreciation of her as an intelligent character, capable of using her intellect to 'get round the Doctor' which concur with Robinson's appreciation of her as a 'rare' and 'significant' example of a 'Black female character of any sort of prominence' (Robinson 2010:157).

> She is strong, capable, and intelligent, yet also feminine and vulnerable (Robinson 2010: 157).

In his conclusion Robinson is positive about the way in which 'the writers and directors of *Doctor Who* affirm inclusivity and diversity' and 'understand the presence that strong, intelligent, and capable Black women bring to their stories' (Robinson 2010:161). He also makes the point, however, that for Martha and her family, as with the character of Mickey (Rose's boyfriend) previously, 'these characters are essentially defined by their similarities to the dominant society' (ibid: 161). Robinson wonders whether this 'is an attempt to eliminate the possibility of negative stereotyping or perhaps it signifies the complications that arise when writing for characters of colour', so that those aspects which might highlight a character's ethnicity are 'downplayed or erased' (ibid: 161). While taking account of what has been noted about the lack of diversity within the panel groups, there is still a significant point to be attended to here. The panel groups give an indication Robinson's suggestion that ethnic difference has been 'downplayed or erased' is close to the mark because it provoked no comment whatsoever, in contrast to the issue of the unequal male/female relationship between the Doctor and his companion, which did provoke comment.

Gender stereotyping and the language used to describe the Doctor and his companions

If Robinson makes a case for ethnic difference being flattened out to the point of non-existence or at least becoming non-observable in the re-booted *Doctor Who*, as has begun to be seen from the empirical data, this is far from the case with gender (Robinson 2010). Much of the recent scholarship reflects on the fact that this is problem which is inherent within the premise of the programme (Britton 2011; Jowett 2014; Wallace 2010). Britton goes so far as to say of the new *Who* in the Russell T. Davies era, 'the treatment of female protagonists was one of its most worryingly retrogressive aspects' (Britton 2011:128). Indeed, I would go so far as to argue that some of things which have been done to ameliorate the sexism of the past have in some ways failed to achieve their aim. By making the Doctor a more human character capable of potential romantic involvement, instead of, as one of the participants noted in the earlier series, 'more of a father figure', his maleness becomes a heightened aspect of his identity and this is underlined when he is played by younger, male actors such as

David Tennant. Furthermore, this is aspect of the Doctor's identity further enhanced both when he has a younger female actress involved in a story of unrequited love and then an older female actress as the companion, who shows the constant need to deny any romantic relationship. Noah McLaughlin labels the earlier generations of companions 'short-skirt wearing screamers' who are nevertheless 'integral to the show'. In contrast, he suggests that the 2005 reboot 'takes an erstwhile feminist liability and …recasts the companion as a tough woman in a dynamic relationship that changes the Doctor as much as herself' (McLaughlin 2010: 120). From the empirical data I argue that the female companions, while ostensibly no longer 'short-skirt wearing screamers', still play an essentially sub-ordinate role to the Doctor, which is a necessary part of their narrative function but which is noticed and commented on by the participants. Where positive aspects such as Martha's intelligence or Donna's assertiveness and ability to influence the Doctor are brought to the fore, these too end up undercutting their equality, because they serve as means to either 'get round' the Doctor, as one participant put it or to humanise the Doctor and remind him when to stop. These are still stereotypically gendered, female identities, fulfilling the role of civilising the masculine, whose role it is to exercise agency and ultimately power. Hills (2010) and Amy-Chin (2010) note that *Doctor Who* is a polysemic text and yet, it appears from the data that one of the readings not available to the participants is one in which the female companion is the equal of the male Doctor.

The language and concepts with which participants characterised the two companions both revealed and challenged traditional understandings of masculinity and femininity (Gauntlett 2008). Jowett quotes respondents from the ground-breaking study by Tulloch and Jenkins on *Doctor Who* in which respondents said of the companions, 'They're just there for window dressing' and 'They've all been very sort of passive' (Jowett 2014:79). This chimes with the view of long-time 'writer and script editor Terrance Dicks' notion that the *Doctor Who* companion is 'a plot device first and foremost and a character second' (Jowett 2014:79). In relation to the episodes shown to the participants in this study, this is not the case. Participants were aware the companion served a plot and action function, but they responded to the characters as significant parts of the action and none of their interactions focussed on their appearance or looks. The participants did not view Martha or Donna as either 'window

dressing', or entirely 'passive' or simply a plot device (Jowett 2014:79). Their responses to them were not uniform and did have some demonstrably gendered aspects. When describing these the two women they were often contrasted with each other and through their relationship to the Doctor, both stereotypical ways of describing the female. So, as was mentioned earlier, Donna is described as 'a bit, I suppose bolshie…she has no problem bossing The Doctor' in the first panel group in Leicester. Whereas it was commented on that it takes Martha time to get to a place at the end of *Gridlock* where she insists the Doctor sit down and explain himself.

> '…well she, she at the end…yes and gets more so a the end sort of , I want to know all about what you're doing, she was ready to stick up for herself and say what she wanted whereas you were never going to stop Donna being like that anyway 'cos she was always going to say it, oi, go and save these people or whatever' (**Interviewee 2: LE1**).

The data also demonstrates this cannot be labelled as a simple 'reading' of misogyny in the programme. In conversation the participants recognised the different factors which feed into the representation of this relationship while remaining alert to the power differential. It was articulated that the relationship between the Doctor and his companion is a 'complicated' one, as all 'human relationships are inherently', but perhaps especially those that 'don't fit in to a box…and the show had those relationships that are complicated that is a female male relationship, strong friendship, quite romantic ties but they don't fit into boxes' (Interviewee 1: LE1). Elements of this 'complexity' in the relationship stemmed from the length of relationship; it was noted that Donna had been travelling with the Doctor longer than Martha in the episodes viewed and therefore, being further on in their relationship would naturally be more confident. It was also stated, however, that as a character Donna was an 'older woman', more inclined to be 'bolshie', 'feisty', 'bossy' and 'stroppy' with the Doctor, to call him 'spaceman' and to state clearly her viewpoint. For another participant Martha's 'brains' and her use of them to 'kind of get round The Doctor a bit' make her a 'stronger' character (ED4).

The relationship between the Doctor and Donna is then named as 'a more difficult' one, precisely because, 'she doesn't allow him to get away with anything' (Interviewee 3: LE1), in contrast to Martha, who at least initially is viewed here as somewhat more passive and inclined to 'much more hero worship' (Interviewee 4: LE1). Again, Martha is compared to Donna negatively, because Donna is willing to undercut the Doctor's status.

> '…I think Donna sees him more as like spaceman who's like, you're going to do this, because you can do it, whereas Martha's much more like, oh well if he thinks that's ok then I'll just let, I'll let you get on with it.' (**Interviewee 4: LE1**)

Thus, the 'more difficult' relationship in the words of one participant, is also described as the one which is more equal. This is echoed in comments from the other three panel groups. Donna, the older woman who derides the notion of a romantic relationship with the Doctor and who undermines his identity with references to him as 'spaceman' is perceived as having more equality with the Doctor, from the evidence of the participants reactions to these two episodes. The participants also acknowledge the different stages of the relationships viewed in each episode, with Donna having travelled with the Doctor for longer than Martha also effects the nature of their relationship. For one participant particularly from the first panel group in Leicester, the contrast between Donna and Martha, their relationship with the Doctor and their perceived influence and assertiveness in that relationship does not ring true with her experience of medical doctors.

> 'I mean Martha's a doctor, isn't she? Trying to learn. You kind of think that's she's going to be more 'erm in control of things in that, …medical doctors that I know. I apologise if any of you are actually doctors and are quite pushy 'erm but 'er you know quite often medical doctors, they know what they want and you have to if you're working in a professional service where you might and

> whereas ‘erm Donna is not quite doctor material but she knows what she wants and she can get it done.’ (**Interviewee 2: LE1**).

There are some interesting cultural assumptions here which appear to arise from personal experience; ‘medical doctors’ as opposed to those who bear the title because of research, are people who need to be assertive, to ‘know what they want’ because they are working in a ‘professional service’. These are not characteristics which Martha displays. In the judgement of this participant Donna, however, ‘is not quite doctor material’ but is showing that she can decide ‘what she wants’ and more than that, in her relationship with the Doctor, she can achieve this. This was echoed across the panel groups, with participants viewing Donna as ‘a bit of stronger female character’, ‘quite steady in her, in her reactions’ and effective because she is assertive with the Doctor, in being able to articulate what she thinks and telling him what she wants. For another participant in the first panel group in Leicester,

> ‘Donna just comes across as really kind of just like you know the every woman. Like you know what women are these days. They are more assertive and you know that she feels, basically she lays down the rules right up front, this is the way it’s going to be take it or leave it, if you’re leaving it, bye, if you’re taking it you’re going to have to put up with me…’ (**Interviewee 3: LE1**).

Her role is also seen to be a moral compass, bringing the Doctor ‘back to the good side, the human emotions…’. There were, however, those participants for whom her character was ‘too loud’, ‘too noisy’, the attributes often used to classify a woman as bossy, in place of or in contrast to assertiveness. Even her ability to influence the Doctor is then couched in terms which could be viewed negatively through a feminist lens, because it concerns *her* acting as a moral and emotional compass for the *him*, again using a stereotype which has often been utilised to differentiate gendered roles and preoccupations and confine them.

In the representation of the two companions, Martha and Donna, gender is not something which is constructed or understood in isolation; as well as ethnicity which is seemingly invisible, there are also issues of class, education, age, and experience which surface in the data. What must also be noted here is the gendered nature of the Doctor/companion relationship does not simply rely on the characterisation and role of the latter, it also involves the Doctor too and here, the data also produced interesting results. In her essay on the Martha Jones as an 'Apostle' in which she sets out to examine the 'tension between atheism and Christian themes' in the rebooted series, Cherry quotes Russell T. Davies, the series producer and occasional episode writer who says,

> The series lends itself to religious iconography because the Doctor is a proper saviour. He saves the world through the power of mind and passion (Cherry 2013: 80).

Leaving aside, at this juncture, questions which will be addressed in later chapters concerning theology, I want here to argue that the way in which the participants responded to and talk about the Doctor indicate his depiction as 'saviour' is received and understood. Furthermore, this forms another thread in the 'webs of significance' (Geertz 1973:5) which concern gender. In the data the Doctor is frequently described in language and concepts which indicate this status of a powerful saviour figure and even in one instance 'a bit of a god complex' as shown below in a section from first panel group in Leicester:

> '**Interviewer:** So can you say a bit more about The Doctor having a god complex?
>
> **Interviewee 5:** Erm (.) well obviously he's become this kind of more powerful than humans figure who is trying to redeem, well he's trying to redeem himself but you know other people feel inspired by him and they know that he's going to save them and usually does so I think 'erm that's where that comes from, maybe.

Interviewer: Mm.

Interviewee 2: I think he also like the fact that he saves people rather than it's not just that he's doing it for the sake of it. I'm sure…sometimes it's a, yes I'm just going to save people.

Interviewee 3: Well does, it is kind of like he goes looking for trouble. He purposefully goes looking for someone to save.'

This need to save is something the Doctor is 'burdened with', something which requires him to 'sacrifice', to 'redeem', to 'rescue' and to put himself in danger for others, he is a 'selfless person and always trying to help out others'. This fits the trope of the sort of intelligent and non-violent masculine hero, of which Davies speaks. Cherry suggests that because of the Doctor's capacity to regenerate and his desire to save humanity there have 'messianic themes' in the series but 'the Doctor as a Christic figure is strongly developed in the Davies era and particularly in the third revived series,' from which *Gridlock* comes. However, for her it is 'too simplistic to conclude that the Doctor is a straightforward encoding of Christ' and this is certainly not something which was mentioned by the participants, even if what was named his 'god-complex' was remarked upon (Cherry 2013: 61). Rather than being intrinsically a Christ-figure, the Doctor occupies a space in which he is more than human and yet, subject to the constraints of human identity in terms of gender and relationships. It is interesting to note the Doctor's gender is not mentioned directly by the participants, it is conveyed through his identity, through the power he has to save, to make moral and ethical judgements and the agency he exercises every week to do this. It is also defined for the participants by his primary relationship, with *his female* companion, which is certainly no longer seen by the participants to be one which is primarily fatherly.

Gender, stereotyping and the audience

Jowett asks the question, 'How long before *Doctor Who* completely alienates half its audience and become just a show about (white) men, by men, for men? (Jowett 2014: 89). Yet, the data reveals that both female and male participants identified and were

concerned by 'the unequal relationship' between the Doctor and his companion (s). It also failed to yield any examples of female or male participants who expressed disaffection with the programme because of this, though other things (e.g. violence, fast-paced speaking, finding it weird) were mentioned. There was even a discussion about the possibility of a female Doctor, which has become a reality now, in the panel group in Cambridge). Their assessment and expectation of it happening any time soon was a lot lower than turned out to be the case. The conversation expressed concern it would adversely impact on viewing figures, particularly amongst a female audience if there was no longer 'a good looking man' and 'a pretty female assistant' to watch because then 'we're all races, demographics ticked…everyone's happy', even if one woman was keen to point out, 'I don't think any of those men are attractive'.

In using a feminist perspective of *Doctor Who* Wallace argues that it is the structural significance of the role of the companion within the universe of the series that makes it an area to be 'fruitfully exploited'. The data shows that this is indeed the case, but it also reveals that simply reading the text of the programmes from a feminist perspective only gives part of the picture. Wallace uses the work of Anne Cranny-Francis who says the viewer has 'two modes of reception: the 'reading position' and the 'subject position'. The first, the 'reading position' is one where 'the text seems to be coherent and intelligible' and is 'created by the text itself producing a textually inscribed audience'. Meanwhile, the second, 'the subject position', is one where the viewer 'approaches the text from a preconceived ideological or theoretical standpoint created by a discourse located outside the text' (Wallace 2010: 102). Thus, Wallace asserts taking a feminist viewpoint on *Doctor Who* means approaching it from the a 'subject position' guided by 'feminist film and television discourses' which aware of the 'contradictions and injustices generated by the dominant gender discourse of patriarchy' (Wallace 2010: 102).

What can be observed from the data relating to the category of *gender* is a more nuanced and complicated situation when engaging with the programmes than the assumption of a 'reading' or 'subject' position as outlined above allows for. The participants could perceive and understand the what was being 'textually inscribed' and

as has been shown they demonstrated significant discomfort with what was perceived as 'an unequal relationship' between the Doctor and his companion, even when the recognised that at least in part this can be attributed to the structure of the programme. They did not see the role of the companion as merely 'a plot device first and foremost and character second' as was understood by Terrance Dicks, a long-time writer and script editor on the classic series (Wallace 2010: 104). The participants themselves identified that in many ways the role of the companion offers 'to provide a 'source of viewer identification'', regardless of gender (Wallace 2010: 106) and so questions of alienating the audience along gender lines is far from a simple equation. However, the language and concepts used also revealed the existence of the participants own ideological perspectives, which were shaping and informing their responses. Ultimately, the power does not reside only in text of the programme alone, it is also what the viewers bring to it which spins the 'webs of significance' (Geertz 1973: 5). In this case, it is fascinating to note that gender generated such a wealth of discussion and was not preserve of either male or female participants. It remains to be seen if this will continue to be the case now there is a female Doctor, who interestingly has not one but three companions.

Chapter Six
Reflections on Theological Methodology

Introduction

In this chapter I turn to the theological. I bring the critical analysis of the data into dialogue with the academic discipline of theology and specifically its methodology. I argue the data reveals several key things to which contemporary theology needs to be attentive. To contextualise and open out the argument, first, I use an illustration taken from the film *The Devil Wears Prada.* Then, using Paul Fiddes' article, 'Concept, Image and Story in Systematic Theology' (2009) as a dialogue partner, I will reflect on the difficulty (popular) culture has encountered offering anything more than the occasional illustrative 'moment' to the content of theology. I will conclude this section by arguing, in conversation with Graham Ward's *Introduction to Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice* (2005), and in particular his concept of reading the 'signs of times' in relation to doing theology (Ward 2005:10), that empirical data from the reception of popular culture, in this case television, offers theology an insight into 'the signs of the times'. I will then go on to argue that the data analysis demonstrates that giving popular culture space in the arena of academic theology particularly sharpens questions around a cultural-linguistic understanding of religion and theology as proposed in George Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine* (2009). This can be observed most keenly in reflecting on the relationship between academic theologians and the people who make up the communities of practice, who according to the tenets of narrative theology are the ones doing the 'first-order' interpretation and living out of the Christian story. As part of this section, I will return to the work of Parsemain (2016) which was used earlier and the concept of different modalities of viewing. By the end of the chapter I will have shown that an understanding of the narrative world(s) people inhabit as they construct meaning in their lives is essential for contemporary theology, not least because the language of Christianity is no longer necessarily the first language of those who are Christians.

High fashion and bargain basement blue sweaters – what's the relationship?

The arguments regarding the pervasive nature of the televisual and its dominance as a cultural phenomenon in contemporary British society have been rehearsed earlier in this thesis (see also Hann 17.9.2017 Guardian 'Co-parented by popular culture: why celebrity deaths affect us so deeply'); now, I am arguing that for theology to ignore this powerful medium for stories, metaphor, language and imagination, is to its impoverishment. Unsurprisingly, I am using an instance from a piece of popular culture to illustrate the problems inherent in a description of theology and popular culture which views each as discrete entity which has little or no connection to each other. In the popular and successful film (see https://www.imdb.com), *The Devil Wears Prada*, the main character Andrea (Andy) Sachs wants to be a serious journalist. She accepts a job at one of the most illustrious women's magazines in New York simply as a step into her chosen career of journalism. She expresses no interest in fashion and her character is dressed to display this disinterest; she is at odds with the world in which she is working, and it is obvious. She does not 'speak' the same language or care about the same things. One day Andy is in the room where her boss, Miranda Priestly, the much-feared editor of the magazine is trying to decide which of two belts to use for a fashion shoot. Andy is overheard by Miranda remarking that they both look the same to her. Miranda has taken a chance in employing someone different from her usual choice of a well-groomed, fashion obsessed, desperate to work at *Runway*, young woman who is totally absorbed by and in this world. In her response to Andy's dismissal of the importance of the choice between the two belts, Miranda looks at the hideous blue acrylic sweater Andy is wearing, the very epitome of anti-fashion in a world of chic. She then gives her the most withering rundown of when this colour first appeared on the catwalk several season ago, its history through a variety of appearances since then in the work of various designers, and the way in which it has trickled down eventually to the bargain basement bin Andy clearly picked it from believing it had no connection with fashion. She excoriatingly demonstrates the relationship between the high-end fashion Andy wants to distinguish herself from and the very sweater she has chosen to wear; the colour of which Miranda notes was determined by someone in the same room they now occupy several years ago. Andy wants to believe she is immune from the world of high fashion, but Miranda demonstrates that she is not and cannot be; her choices about what to wear, even when they appear to go against any interest in fashion remain

circumscribed by what is available. This is influenced by a culture which encompasses her, even when she wants to avoid it and dismiss it. It is a wonderful, fictional moment which articulates the symbiotic relationship between the two ends of the fashion world; the high fashion designers, the models, catwalks and glossy magazines, and the people who wear the bargain basement blue sweaters, who remain essential to the whole fashion culture and whose choices are shaped and even constrained by their polar opposite, even when they do not recognise it or seek to deny it.

In the context of this chapter on theological methodology, one way to 'read' this illustration is for academic theology to occupy the position of Andy, forced to encounter and even work amidst the world of glossy, high fashion which she dismisses until Miranda makes her recognise her own participation in the system she believes she has rejected. It illuminates the reality that, even when those who live as part of a culture(s) believe they are rejecting it or avoiding it, it still impinges upon and infuses the way they live, the choices they make or are even offered. Thus, even when academic theology ignores or side-lines popular culture as unworthy of serious contemplation, or even revelation, the world in which it works is shaped by it and this in turn has an impact on theology. The empirical data, meanwhile, indicates another possible reading, particularly in relation to the participants, both Christian and non-Christian. Virtually all of the participants were clearly fluent in the operations of the televisual cultural product. They understand how this medium 'works', some are fans, with specific criteria for judging the quality of an episode; others are more casual viewers but nevertheless are able to engage with the programmes. They discussed the narratives, relating them to their own lives and experience, offering opinions about the structure of the story-telling, comparing them to US television; they knew what they liked and enjoyed and what they did not, they were self-aware. The one participant who was not familiar with the cultural context and was astonished by the level of violence in the episodes of Doctor Who, served to illustrate the way in which the others within that group were enculturated to it. In this chapter, I will assert that it is also true of theology, even when it seeks to distance itself from (popular) culture, in the contemporary British context, it cannot because those who form Christian communities are embedded in the culture(s) of which they are part, and it is the language and discourses of these culture(s) which they use every day.

I will also assert that the data posits another way to understand this illustration in relation to theology and popular culture and poses a serious question for theology to consider. Miranda sees herself as the guardian of fashion, she is aware of the power she possesses in shaping fashion choices, even for those who are a long way from her sphere of interest, the people who wear the bright blue synthetic bargain bin sweaters. The cultural-linguistic approach in narrative theology positions theologians as the guardians of grammar in relation to theology, claiming that their work is 'a 'second-order' language, *reflecting* conceptually on the first-order religious expression of story and symbol', yet, there is little evidence of 'where this first-order material is to be found' (Lindbeck 2009, Fiddes 2009: 8). I will argue, one way in which the empirical data can contribute to theology is by highlighting difficulties in narrative theology's concept of the relationship between the content of theology, who produces it and how it is used (a contribution itself from the Cultural Studies theory of the circuit of culture) (Johnson 1986).

***'It's all trash…you throw it away…'* (WH3).**

In this section I make use of Paul Fiddes' differentiation between theological aesthetics and aesthetic theology to assist as I consider what role, if any, there may be for popular culture (in this case television) with regard to the content of theology? I will ask whether it is to be considered an area of human experience which is to be excluded from theology on the grounds of tending too much towards idolatry and leading those who engage with it too much along this path as well. Fiddes puts forward in 'Concept, Image and Story in Systematic Theology' (2009) a persuasive argument for a place for 'aesthetic theology' within the conceptual enterprise of systematic theology' (Fiddes 2009:3). He establishes, by comparing and contrasting the contents of two Oxford Handbooks published recently, ('one of 'Systematic Theology', and the other of 'English Literature and Theology') 'that there is far more work going on in the area of what may be called *theological aesthetics* than in *aesthetic theology*' (Fiddes 2009:4). Acknowledging that 'aesthetics' itself is a 'notoriously slippery concept' which has frequently been set aside 'as more or less useless by both theologians and literary critics' (Fiddes 2009:5). Fiddes choses to stick with it because he wants that sense of broadness in his discussion; for the term to hold within its domain a number of different

areas which the arts embrace, 'notably their dependence on the senses, their expression of beauty, and their power of communication, whether what is communicated may appear 'beautiful' or not (ibid:5). In defining 'theological aesthetics' Fiddes notes the way in which all these facets of the arts are explored 'with the framework of theology' (ibid:5). Meanwhile, using the work of Richard Viladesau, 'aesthetic theology' is characterised by its use of 'language, content, method and theory' from the 'aesthetic realm' (ibid:5). Here then, 'the arts', whether 'religious' or 'secular' are both 'a source for theology (content)' and supply 'hermeneutical theory taken from the arts to sources of theology itself (method)' (ibid:5). Returning to the Oxford Handbooks, Fiddes notes 'what is strikingly absent in both is any appeal to literature for the *content* of theology'. He goes on 'to ask how the images and stories in literature outside scripture can contribute to the actual *making* of systematic theology, not just to an illustrating of it…' (ibid: 5) I want to demonstrate with regard to television, that through the stories and concepts it uses, and the responses they elicit, it can contribute to the actual *making* of systematic theology. I will particularly examine this proposal alongside the concept of 'narrative theology', where engagement with television and responses to it in this study has drawn attention its limitations.

Fiddes acknowledges that 'aesthetic theology' is viewed as a hazardous enterprise' as is made clear by both Karl Barth and Hans Urs von Balthasar because of the inherent danger that using theories from beyond theology are seen to pose because they may cause 'the confusion of God with the world or even idolatry' (Fiddes 2009:5). In relation to 'aesthetics' the temptation of idolatry arises through the use of theories of beauty. Fiddes articulates the way in which Barth and von Balthasar, each in their own way, relate 'beauty' as an aesthetic concept to theology and specifically to God's self-revelation in the world. If the possibility of idolatry exists when theology engages with those expressions of art which are traditionally found acceptable (usually those which fall within the category of 'high art' such as classical music, literature, drama or art), because it is believed that their concern with beauty links to God's self-revelation, the reverse is true for television. There is a suspicion of incipient idolatry in relation to cultural artefacts which are labelled popular, and which do not primarily set out to create a product which is beautiful. Television engages sight, hearing and emotion through image, speech, sound and story; communication takes place, but the primary

purpose is rarely beauty and often simply entertainment (Callaway 2016). Until very recently, and still only on rare occasions, does theology spend time engaging with the now well-developed discipline of media and cultural studies (Crome and McGrath 2013; Marsh 2018). When it does happen, most attention is paid to the 'text' or narrative content, rather than to audience reception. In part this is because television is not deemed to be a medium concerned with concepts of beauty, and in part because of a division between film and television studies. The former finds its foundation in the humanities and therefore primarily concerned with the text, the latter locating its home in the social sciences and therefore expressing more interest in what audiences are doing with their viewing (Zaborowski & Dhaenens 2016: 447). Furthermore, as Quash notes concerning the arts, theological scholarship has been criticised for being 'frequently shallow', failing to use a range of 'critical tools' and using the arts merely 'for the illustration of a preconceived theological point' (Quash 2013: xvi). The result for television is the assumption of a position of intellectual superiority, rather than an exploration of its theories or content. Judging by the amount of attention which academic theology has paid to television (until relatively recently), it is not considered to be a means by which God's self-revelation may occur and furthermore, no defence can be mounted for it from the aesthetic concept of beauty and its foundation in the glory of God (Fiddes 2009:5)

There is hope here though in Fiddes' argument for the use of concept, image and significantly, story, in systematic theology. He makes use of von Balthasar's proposal that 'all human drama should be measured for its effectiveness against the form of Christ' as an example of theological aesthetics. For Fiddes Christ's passion 'is the summit of all human drama', which means that drama which is formed by intended Christocentrism 'should be privileged over others' because 'a certain glory is revealed when free-willed acceptance of suffering makes an offering of love out of what would otherwise be blind fate' (Fiddes 2009:6). There can be no doubt that measured against this criterion, much televisual output would fail to attain this privileged position and be deemed worthy of consideration. There are instances when its content may encompass this level of tragedy, suffering and self-offering love but they are not a daily occurrence. Using this concept, however, Fiddes also makes the case for this being an example of 'aesthetic theology' too, because of the way in which the nature of God's being and

working in the world is 'described as a drama at all', which he identifies as a 'contribution from aesthetics to theology' (Fiddes 2009:6).

> The theological assertion that we are being drawn into the 'drama' of God's eternal procession of love and God's temporal mission of love in the world is itself a contribution of aesthetics to systematic theology (Fiddes 2009:7).

Fiddes goes on to note that Nicholas Lash 'prefers to classify metaphorical and narrative discourse as; 'religious speech', and to reserve 'theology' for conceptual reflection on religious expression' (Fiddes 2009:7). He sees 'no need to deny the title 'theology' to a mode of talking about God which is characteristic both of the everyday speech of the community of faith and of a certain kind of academic thinking' (ibid:7). It is this 'everyday speech of the community of faith' (ibid: 7) which is of interest to the argument I am making here. It begs the question how, and in what context is that speech learnt. Television offers a great deal of drama, fact and fiction, which does not meet the criterion of being Christ-formed. It cannot be given space at the theological table on these grounds, any more than it can necessarily and routinely meet the criterion of an aesthetic of beauty. I am arguing it remains worthy of theological consideration because it gives an insight into the culture(s) and narrative world(s) in which 'the everyday speech of the community of faith' is learnt and spoken (Fiddes 2009: 7). Theology, by paying heed to television, to its academic study and particularly attending to audience responses to what they have viewed, is offered a way into 'the everyday speech of the community of faith' as it connects to and engages with the popular culture which surrounds it, and dare I say absorbs it. In the next section I will continue to build the case for what it is that engagement with television has to offer theology and why it is important by examining the power of story.

The power of story

Kutter Callaway asserts in the *Watching TV Religiously: Television and Theology in Dialogue* (2016), 'television traffics in stories. It is a narrative medium through and

through', whether dealing in fact or fiction, sport or soap opera, 'it is always narrating the world to us' (Callaway 2016: 138). He goes on,

> These narratives – consumed through various media and ritually incorporated into our lived experience – shape our basic awareness of the world. (Callaway 2016:138)

In contemporary British society, to ignore television is to choose consciously not to engage with the primary means through which stories, factual or fictional, are told; furthermore, to remain ignorant of its theories is to dismiss as irrelevant and trivial a means of communication which in some way touches and shapes everyone's lives, even those who do not watch, because it affects those around them. The case can be made that in trying to distance itself from idolatry when relating to popular culture, academic theology falls headlong into it in a different way. It does this by refusing to engage with a medium which is constitutive in the contemporary world; a world where theology teaches, that God, whose nature is to be continually creative and whose Spirit is active, is present. It is because of this theology needs to engage, in a way which is more than cursory, with television. If theologians exclude television from their purview then they are declining engagement with one of the major players in contemporary meaning-making, as this empirical data and analysis has shown. An engagement can mean the union between two people or it can suggest going into battle, so entering into an engagement with television does not mean that theology sets aside the power of critique. For, as Callaway notes when discussing the US programme *CSI*, the theological,

> opens us up to the real source of tension between the show and a Christian ethic. That is, it isn't the violence that should disturb us theologically; it's the uncreative storytelling (Callaway: 2016:122).

I am not arguing that every dialogue between theology and television needs to be a battle, simply that by taking television seriously theology is not capitulating its capacity to use

its critical voice. I am also asserting this research has shown that when asked to discuss the *Doctor Who* episodes they had viewed together, the participants quite naturally did a number of things; first, they related the stories they had seen to their own life experience in both factual ('I'm an astrophysicist' and 'there is no sound in space'; 'I'm a historian') and affective ways, ('that touched me…'). Second, their response to the programmes clearly involved a variety of narrative strands which formed the threads from which their own stories were woven and which provided the material from which their individual and collective responses were fashioned. For example, within the groups there were observable strands of expectation with regard to morality and ethics concerning the BBC. This stemmed from its history and identity as a public service broadcaster with a particular ethos, which, when producing a programme deemed by a significant section within the panel groups to be a 'children's programme' or 'family entertainment', would therefore have a certain set of responsibilities with which to work. Meanwhile, there was a vocal minority, who were utterly determined that the programme is not, and has not ever been 'a children's programme'; furthermore, it should not be characterised or judged as such. Both these perspectives illuminate the way in which participants had already assimilated other narratives within theirs which were then observable, as they were threaded into the warp and weft their responses to the *Doctor Who* narratives. The first concerned an understanding of what the BBC is for and about, as a public service broadcaster; the second is about the cultural valuation or dismissal of *Doctor Who* when it is regarded as primarily a children's or family programme and the role that fandom plays in shaping expectations and responses. What this has to offer theology is multi-faceted and includes both a sense of the 'signs of the times', and some questions for narrative theology about where and how the first-order theology as it understands and articulates it is taking place and what that means when placed alongside concepts like 'the circuit of culture' and modalities of viewing. In the next section of this chapter I will explore further the what engaging with the 'signs of the times' means for theologians and how engaging with television can assist in this.

'From where does the theologian speak?' 'Reading the 'signs of the times' (Ward 2005:4 and 2)

In this section, I am drawing on the work of Graham Ward, specifically points he makes regarding theology in the Introduction to *Cultural Transformation and Religious Practice* (2005). Ward identifies his motivation for writing this essay as stemming from questions which arose when he was wrestling with writing the follow up to *Cities of God* (2001). How to elucidate the relationship between Christian practices and the nature of the culture in which they exist and how this relationship shapes those practices? Ward realised that a vital constituent part of this relationship is the way in which cultures alter, how discourses arise within them, are accepted as believable and become changed or even discredited. He states, 'the question I am trying to sketch an answer for is: what makes a belief believable?' (Ward 2005: 1) Though this is not the question I am asking, Ward's points are noteworthy because his observations about certain academic frameworks and discourses, and their 'antithetical' relationship with theology can be located in the empirical data; not, of course, expressed as academic frameworks and discourses but as implicit aspects of inhabited narrative worlds. Ward goes on to note that this question, 'what makes a belief believable?' (Ward 2005:1) is not one which he alone is asking. Furthermore, in answering it he will draw upon the work of Michel de Certeau, Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, as well as others. He points out that their work and thinking, 'as in the social sciences more generally' is produced within a 'framework' that is 'secular' and furthermore, 'in some respects it is a framework not neutral to the discourse of theology, but antithetical' (Ward 2005:1). He explains that 'each of these continental projects stands within a critique that has been handed down to social scientists by Kant, Marx and Nietzsche.' (Ward 2005:1) Yet, while it might be expected that religion, and theology in particular, should respond with a parallel opposition, Ward suggests a radically different course. He asserts that those things which theology would naturally use for analysis, 'liturgies, sacred texts, creedal statements, Church Council documents', are not made to assist interactions and understanding with the cultures which provide its context, and are 'only partially fashioned to facilitate theology's own self-reflection' (Ward 2005:2). Ward is convinced that theology 'needs to borrow' 'tools' from 'the social and human sciences,

in order to understand the processes of enculturation and accreditation that situate and govern any theologically orientated project' (Ward 2005:2).

> The analysis issues from a Christian question; a question fundamental to theological notions such as mission, apologetics, the divine telos of being human, doctrines of time, history, *Parousia*, eschatology and ecclesiology: how do read the sign of the times? (Ward 2005:2)

I recognise that there are theologians who would disagree profoundly with Ward's assertion concerning the necessity for theology to appropriate 'tools' from other disciplines, including the influential shaper of twentieth century theology, Karl Barth (who Ward himself uses as a dialogue partner). It is, however, the question Ward arrives at as foundational to the theological task which is of most significance here, 'how do we read the sign of the times?' For Ward the imperative for this interdisciplinary 'borrowing' by theology rests with the need for Christianity to communicate 'the gospel's specific transformative practices of hope in the new urban landscape'; to do this it must have an understanding of how it stands alongside other 'discursive practices' and why? What is believable and why? (Ward 2005:2). Jobling (2010) makes a similar point regarding the fruitfulness for theology and religious studies in paying attention to the spiritual in contemporary 'cultural icons' and thereby discovering 'insight into the framing of the moral and religious imagination'. This in turn,

> …can prompt traditional religions to reflect on whether their own narratives are actually framed in a way resonating with the 'signs of the times? (Jobling 2010: 2).

Here, I want to pause and take a step back from Ward's argument. I want to pay particular attention to his acknowledgement that there are other 'discursive practices' which are influencing and shaping the way in which people make-meaning about the world in which they live and their place in it. While Ward is referencing other academic disciplines such as the social sciences, I want to take his observation and extend it in a

different direction in relation to the empirical data. It is clear from the data that those participating in the groups dwell within a number of 'narrative' worlds, which form and inform their responses to and interpretations of their viewing. For example, those who were dedicated fans had, as has been noted before, a framework for viewing and evaluating the programmes which was embedded in the narrative culture of *Doctor Who* and the expectations of their established 'canon'. Their fandom was an important formative aspect of their response. Did the episode develop or transgress the expectations of the 'canon' of *Doctor Who*? Had the monsters been used before, if so, when and in what context? For one participant, as has been noted, each episode seen was scored on his individual scale, with set criteria for a 'good' episode. It was not only the fans, however, who brought with them and expressed aspects of the other narrative worlds in which they live, and through which they make meaning and purpose. Thus, as has been seen discussion on the main characters invariably led to conversation in which gender and power were significant factors. Those who had indicated their Christian faith demonstrated a sophisticated ability and willingness to acknowledge that while their response to the use of hymns was positive, if somewhat surprised and questioning, others might interpret their use differently and even with hostility. As has been shown, some of the participants with a declared Christian faith evidenced they were well aware that they are living in a culture in which other 'discourses' may perceive and interpret something sacred to them in a diametrically opposed way. The reactions of some of the other participants to the hymns did indeed include elements both of recognising hope offered and community created through the corporate singing, alongside suspicion about the use of hymns. Reference was made to possible 'brainwashing', however, there was also another important aspect to the reaction of several participants – the recognition that the corporate singing and its portrayal as an emotional experience, resulted in an affective response for them of discomfort.

I am arguing, therefore, that alongside using the insights of other academic disciplines where appropriate, in order to grapple with Ward's question, 'how do we read the signs of the times?' (Ward 2005:202), the contemporary theologian also needs to pay attention to popular culture and the way in which study, not just of its content but its reception, can reveal the complex and overlapping narrative worlds which people inhabit. The people living within these multiple, and sometimes competing and

overlapping narrative worlds include Christians. They do not dwell within a narrative world which is completely cut-off or distinct from others, unless they are part of a particular sect which seeks to deliberately isolate itself (and whether this is possible is questionable). Furthermore, theologians themselves do not dwell outside these narrative worlds either. Frances Young characterises the theologian thus:

> The theologian seeks to make sense of God and the universe, of human nature and human life, of history and human behaviour, in light of contemporary knowledge about the way things are, as well as the Bible and the traditions of Christian doctrine (Young 2013:7).

I am arguing that popular culture, and specifically here empirical study of its reception, offers the theologian a means of engaging with human subjectivity, so that 'common sense' assumptions about the nature of 'the way things are', are not permitted to obfuscate reality or are shown to be demonstrably true (Young 2013:7). Theologians need to acknowledge that they are working at the intersection between academic theology, the Church and the world, and that the contemporary world is one in which popular culture (in this case television) plays a significant role in shaping understanding and receptivity to belief (or not). Frances Young goes on to say,

> In other words, theology grows out of engagement with scripture in such a way as to create meaning for the particular people gathered together for liturgy (Young 2013:11).

It is that particularity of people, their context, their narrative worlds into which I am arguing engagement with popular culture allows insight, giving a sense of the 'signs of the times', which Ward argues is essential to the work of contemporary theology, if it is to fulfil its task of communicating the transforming and life-giving hope of the gospel. Ward puts it like this:

> The theologian can only understand the faith held and practised by the Christian Church, the theological task this enjoins and the people to whom this task is addressed through what is culturally and historically available. The theo-logic of theology itself, the faith that seeks understanding, is then constituted in a cultural negotiation between the revelation of Christ to the Church (rooted in the Scriptures, the sacraments and the tradition of their interpretation and application) and the 'signs of the times'. Both the danger and the possibility of apologetics lie in the degree of critical difference that can be maintained between the Christian *evangelium* and the ways of the world. But, and this remains fundamental, neither can be accessed without the other (Ward 2005:10).

There are two points to be reiterated here. First, to leave out popular culture, to leave out the mass medium which is television with all its power in story-telling, is to leave out a medium which is not only culturally available to theologians, but which remains definitive in sharing and shaping the world the Christian church and Christian people inhabit in the contemporary British context. Second, for theology to have a sense of the Christian story's place in the world, to recognise and address the difference and distance between the Christian '*evangelium'* and the ways of the world, it is necessary for it to take seriously the insights concerning meaning-making which the study of popular culture and its reception can provide concerning the 'signs of the times' (Ward 2005:2)

I am going to end this section with a final point from Ward. He argues Christianity 'approaches the world critically', a 'critique' which 'issues from both its ethical and its eschatological vision'. (Ward 2005:168). 'Christianity's critique of the world is not, however, simply negative', it is part of the way in which Christianity participates in the 'redemptive operation' and 'the establishment of hope' (Ward 2005:168).

> Theological discourse relates then to the productive transformation of culture by directing such transformation towards a transcendent hope. It works not only to participate in but to perform the presence of Christ. In and through its working the cultural imaginary is changed, and alternative forms of sociality, community,

> and relation are fashioned, imagined, and to some extent embodied (Ward 2005:172).

To advocate engagement with television, with popular culture and especially with its reception is not to suggest a wholesale embracing of that which can be denigrating, dehumanising or diminishing. I am the first to admit there are plenty of examples of these things currently available on contemporary television. It is to argue that critiquing something appropriately requires more than superficial dismissal or quick condemnation. It necessitates the same patient work in understanding popular culture, and specifically television, that theologians expect to expend when engaging with other areas of research and knowledge. It means accepting that the possibility of change and transformation may not only be one-sided.

I have argued that television is more than trashy transient entertainment, tending towards the idolatrous, and that engagement with it is essential because of its position as the primary storytelling medium in contemporary British culture. I have asserted that engagement with television, and specifically in this research its reception, offers *a* means for theologians to read the 'signs of the times', which Ward asserts is a necessary part of the theologians' task. Now, using the empirical data, I am moving the argument forward by using a instance in which it has raised questions about a specific aspect of contemporary theology.

Who are the theologians?

I continue my argument for the positive contribution popular culture, in this case television, can offer to theology using George A. Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine* (2009) as a dialogue partner. I assert his articulation of a cultural linguistic understanding of religions and religious doctrine is a helpful concept when considering the relationship between theology and popular culture. Lindbeck's work on a cultural-linguistic model for theology, and the school of narrative theology arising from it, provides an excellent dialogue partner for the empirical data and its analysis because it

takes seriously the way in which the language and concepts people use in their conversation about the programmes they watched does indeed communicate something about how they view and understand the world. It does present both Lindbeck's model for theology and the school of narrative theology with some challenges, which I will delineate.

Lindbeck outlines three different understandings of religion; the cognitive-propositional, the experiential-expressivist and the cultural-linguistic (Lindbeck 2009). Here I will succinctly survey his description of each. Many years before Callum Brown's assertion about the loss of Christian culture in Britain, Lindbeck observed, 'fewer and fewer people are deeply embedded in particular religious traditions or thoroughly involved in particular religious communities' (Brown 2001, Lindbeck 2009:7). Lindbeck characterises the consequences of this erosion of commitment as creating the circumstances in which people find it difficult not only to accept the doctrinal propositions of religion but even 'to perceive or experience religion' in this way as 'sets of objectively and immutably true propositions' (ibid:7). Thus, the cognitive-propositional approach to religion, and in this case Christianity in particular, has become hard to maintain; instead according to Lindbeck, as this understanding has been on the 'defensive', an experiential-expressive one has been in the 'ascendancy' (Lindbeck 2009:5).

Whereas the cognitive-propositional approach to religion places great emphasis on the doctrines which govern and order belief, the experiential-expressive places it on inner experience, taking the 'form of individual quests for personal meaning' (Lindbeck 2009:8). Lindbeck makes the point that in the American context this viewpoint on religion had become 'well established by the nineteenth century'; what has changed in the twentieth and early twenty-first is that as,

> we move into a culturally (even if not statistically) post-Christian period … increasing numbers of people regard all religions as possible sources of symbols

> to be used eclectically in articulating, clarifying and organizing the experiences of the inner self (Lindbeck 2009:8).

Lindbeck is equally unconvinced by 'experiential-expressive' forms of religion, as he is by the efficacy of the cognitive-propositional in the current cultural environment. He makes the case for a third way of understanding religion, which he calls a 'cultural-linguistic' model in which,

> religions are seen as comprehensive interpretive schemes, usually embodied in myths and narratives and heavily ritualized, which structure human experience and understanding of self and world (Lindbeck 2009:18).

Lindbeck goes on to make the point, when the 'myths' and 'narratives' of a religion are shared, not every re-telling of these stories will fall into the category of religious function. For him, the defining factor, (taking up and building on a suggestion of William Christian's) is the 'particular purpose or interest' with which the story is re-told. If it is not re-told to articulate that which is of primary importance, above everything else 'in the universe' and around which all of life is to 'organized', both 'behaviour' and 'beliefs', then it is no longer functioning as religion. This does not mean though, states Lindbeck, that the story or the 'interpretative scheme' is without impact, 'it may continue to shape in various ways the attitudes, sentiments, and conduct of individuals and of groups' even when it is no longer strictly or 'explicitly' practised or followed as such (Lindbeck 2009: 18ff). What Lindbeck wants to draw attention to is the way in which the,

> linguistic-cultural model…stresses the degree to which human experience is shaped, molded, and in a sense constituted by cultural and linguistic forms. There are numberless thoughts we cannot think, sentiments we cannot have, and realities we cannot perceive unless we learn to use the appropriate symbol systems…To become a Christian involves learning the story of Israel and of

> Jesus well enough to interpret and experience oneself and one's world in its terms (Lindbeck 2009:20).

Lindbeck's description of religion(s) and theology is a critical dialogue partner here because it notices and articulates the way in which Christianity operates not simply as a set of doctrinal propositions which those who have faith must adhere to, nor as an inner experience of the divine. The 'experiential-expressivist' dimensions of religion are not suppressed, indeed for Lindbeck the 'cultural-linguistic' model allows room for those parts of human life which are not easily put into words because it concentrates on the practice of way of life, the learning of a set of skills.

> One learns to feel, act and think in conformity with a religious tradition that is, in its inner structure, far richer and more subtle than can be explicitly articulated (Lindbeck 2009:21).

Indeed, Lindbeck goes further and says,

> In short, it is necessary to have the means for expressing an experience in order to have it, and the richer our expressive or linguistic system, the more subtle, varied and differentiated can be our experience (Lindbeck 2009:23).

In Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic model for religion and theology, the first-order theology is done by those who are part of the Christian community, in their communal life and worship together, the role of the theologian is to reflect on this first order activity and be the guardian of the grammar. In the contemporary British cultural context, via the lens of the empirical data, there are then some questions to ask of the this model for theology, even if it appears to have much in sympathy with a comprehension of the world which takes the experiences and our linguistic and symbolic systems which express them seriously.

Before engaging with the questions the empirical data raises, I will explore what is meant by narrative theology. While 'narrative theology' has been used to label a number of different perspectives in theology, what characterises them is their use of 'theories of literature and/or literary genres for theological reflection'; it remains tendentious to apply this category, first because 'it is not clear that these views necessarily set out to be identified as part of one enterprise' and 'not all of those who have been identified as proponents…accept such an appellation'(McGrath 1993: 395). Nevertheless, it is possible to use the term 'narrative theology' to articulate the way in which during the twentieth century there was undoubtedly a turn towards the concept of 'narrative' in theology as significant means of understanding, interpreting and expressing the self-revelation of God in history and the relationship between God and humanity, and how that was and is experienced and articulated (Grenz and Olsen 1992:271). In the discussion of Lindbeck I noted his concern with the Christian story as a 'comprehensive scheme or story', rather than 'a set of propositions to be believed' and 'the medium in which one moves, a set of skills that one employs in living one's life' has been highlighted (Lindbeck 2009: 21). Thus, narrative theology represents an understanding of faith which sees the personal and individual stories of adherents of Christianity joined to that of their religious community, and 'ultimately the grand narrative of the divine action in the world' (Grenz and Olsen 1992:271). While narrative theology was evolving using the 'grand narrative of divine action in the world' (ibid: 217), individuals' understanding and experience of it, and their place within it was exerting less and less hold on British culture. Callum Brown, less than a decade into the twenty-first century declared, 'the death of the culture which formerly conferred Christian identity upon the British people as a whole' (Brown 2001: 193).

Returning here to Fiddes, his discussion of the merits and limitations of narrative theology offers useful insights. For Fiddes 'narrative theology' appears to offer much, 'meeting the criticism of Paul Tillich that theology in the modern world has been dominated by concepts, or the 'formal side of the rational function'; setting out to be informed by the images and stories of the bible which inform and shape the Christian community while also, following the 'cultural-linguistic' approach of George Lindbeck, remaining open both to the experiential and holding the 'doctrinal concepts' 'as a kind of "grammar" or set of rules for reading and telling the story derived from Scripture' (Fiddes 2009:7). Yet,

it also fails to live up to its initial promise for Fiddes, particularly in its 'cultural-linguistic' form. The space for material from beyond the Scriptures to contribute to theological understanding is limited by the way in which 'an 'intratextual' method locates meaning in the usages of specific language, and this is the language of Scripture' (Fiddes 2009:7).

> …it is not envisaged that novels or Shakespeare's tragedies might actually contribute anything to the meaning of the particular religious language which is being correlated with the form of life of the Christian community (Fiddes 2009:7).

Fiddes identifies a problem with the understanding that the cultural-linguistic approach of narrative theology has in describing the relationship between the Christian community and the culture(s) within which it exists. The boundary it draws between the two is far too distinct, and though it recognises 'that the Christian community cannot exist in splendid isolation' and 'the Christian *way of life* is certainly influenced by other cultures and is mixed up with them', it also wants to say that 'Christian *identity*' is not or should be protected from becoming so (ibid:7).

> So, it is said, the vocabulary of Christian doctrines may be shaped by outside cultures, but not the rules that determine the use of vocabulary, or the basic shape of the story…Expert speakers of the language (theologians) are skilled in the grammar that is generated entirely within the Christian tradition, and these rules of speech create their own world of meaning. Borrowed cultural material takes on a totally new sense in Christian use, and its former meaning is supposedly irrelevant for the Christian way of life (Fiddes 2009:7).

Fiddes cites the work of Kathryn Tanner (1997) on theories of culture in relation to theology, in critique of this understanding of Christian culture, language and speech as so wholly boundaried from other cultures and their 'beliefs and values'.

> The late-modern approach to culture rightly sees diverse cultures as *sharing* cultural elements, with open boundaries between them (Fiddes 2009:8).

One of the central tenets of narrative theology is that it is said to occupy a 'corrective' rather than 'constitutive' function and studies the ways in which 'first-order' interpretation is taking place (Fodor 2005:231). This research indicates that a key aspect of exploring what Christian communities are doing in their 'first-order' interpretation of Scripture or the praxis of their life together, is understanding that this 'first-order' interpretation takes place within the complex, connected and sometimes competing culture(s) which are shaping and forming people both beyond and within those Christian communities (in this instance, in a British context). The empirical data suggests an important question to ask of narrative theology, or theology understood in cultural-linguistic terms, is how they function in a wider cultural context which is either ignorant of, or apathetic or hostile towards the Christian narrative? For this is the context in which Christians are seeking to become fluent in the language of their faith and for many contemporary Christians, it will not be their first language.

This is not to say that the empirical data does not offer glimpses of the echoes and resonances of religious stories re-told and still shaping understanding. This was especially true in relation to one figure, that of the Doctor. I will discuss this here using Pete Ward as a dialogue parter. In *Gods Behaving Badly: Media, Religion and Celebrity Culture* (2011) he rejects the notion that celebrity culture is a 'religion' on a number of grounds: lack of a 'transcendent other', no regular gathering of 'worshippers', insufficient evidence with regard to whether provision of resources for meaning is being constituted and for the most part, a distinct lack of seriousness with regard to those who engage in celebrity culture (P. Ward 2011:6). What he does suggest it that there is an 'unhooking' of religious language and concepts from their original purpose to use in celebrity culture (P. Ward 2011). I want to suggest that a similar 'unhooking' is taking place with regard to the language which is used by the participants to discuss the Doctor in the panel groups. This language, often theological, has been 'unhooked' from the Christian story, and is not functioning religiously, and yet, it demonstrates something of Lindbeck's contention, that the 'interpretative

scheme' of a religion can still influence structures of thought and feeling, even when it is no longer explicitly acknowledged. Furthermore, while Pete Ward writes persuasively about the way in which while celebrity culture is not a 'religion', he also observes it still demonstrates 'at the level of image and representation' 'religious elements' (P. Ward 2011:6).

> They persist as an analogy that articulates theological themes or links up such themes to celebrity culture. Celebrity narratives make frequent use of theological terms and phrases, such as worship, icon, divinity, sin, fall, redemption, and salvation. These terms have been unhooked from their previous location in a largely Christian theological tradition and have been rearticulated with celebrities as symbols of the self. So theological themes are taken up and used to structure the way in which the media discuss celebrities' various cavortings, successes, and failures. The mix of the sacred and the profane then serves as a resource for the negotiation of identity in and through popular culture (P. Ward 2011:6).

For Pete Ward, the use of 'theological metaphors and religious analogies' are a sign of the way in which contemporary popular culture has made the self' sacred (P. Ward 2011:6). Celebrity culture opens up the 'possibilities of the sacred self', while at the same time undermining its own worship of celebrities by pointing to its own lack of authenticity. While celebrities are held up as 'idols'; they are also often castigated for their perceived failures and flaws so that there is a tension at the heart of celebrity culture which Ward suggests shows 'the conflicted nature not only of our sense of self but also our perception of the divine' (P. Ward 2011:6). The language used to talk about the Doctor, his motivation and actions by some participants included theological words, words like 'salvation', 'redemption', 'sacrifice', 'self-sacrifice', detached, (but not completely so) from their original purpose. They were used to describe the actions and motivations of a fictional science-fiction icon rather than a transcendent being, but the patterns of behaviour they were addressing, even judging, were not entirely inappropriately employed. Participants recognised and were reflecting on the actions of a character who was unlike them in terms of power and the ability to alter events

(divine), and who yet, was understood to be like them (human) in certain ways, his enjoyment of others' company, his care for others, his character imperfections. There was no indication that participants when using this language were drawing a parallel between Jesus and the Doctor. Yet, this does not render the empirical data theologically insignificant; indeed, I think removing it from the idea of a straight symmetry makes it more rather than less important. As was said earlier, to examine how human beings understand human culture can leave God completely out of the conversation and simply be a loud and ultimately theologically empty endeavour. Here, however, I believe we are offered something which is theologically valuable; it may not be God's revelation of God's self but it does assist those working theologically to see a number of things about contemporary culture, its use of language and metaphor, its preoccupations. Underlying the participants' conversation about the Doctor there are similarities with Ward's comments on celebrity culture reflecting understandings of self and the divine. Thus, yet again, the relationship between religion and television is shown to be one which is far more complex than simply one source of stories replacing the other. But where popular culture, its narratives, characters and representation of the world do function as an arena in which people grapple with who they are and where certain things may be attributed as sacred, the 'self' numbering one among them.

Theological methodology and crochet

In the final section of this chapter I will draw the different aspects of the argument I have been making. I have asserted although space cannot be afforded to television on the grounds of its aesthetic qualities, nor yet, for foregrounding storytelling which is Christocentric (Fiddes 2009) it is not idolatrous for theology to engage with television. This is because it is a forum in which the drama of being human is played out narratively through fact and fiction. By paying attention to way in which participants responded to this, theologians are afforded an opportunity to observe through the language and concepts used the way in which meaning is being structured and expressed and the discursive practices which underlie it. Thus, the empirical data foregrounds the importance of personal experience, of affect and 'emotional realism' (Ang 1985). These things are in turn part of the 'signs of the times' (Ward 2005:2)

which Ward argues is vital for theologians to engage with if they want to communicate the hope of the gospel in the contemporary cultural context. It also raises a question concerning Lindbeck's conceptualisation of a 'cultural linguistic' model for theology. Webb (2013) says in his summary of Lindbeck's work:

> Key to his approach is the idea that becoming part of a religious tradition is analogous to learning how to speak a particular language. The best way to learn a new language is not to start with its grammar. The grammatical rules can be picked up along the way. The best way to learn a language, in fact, is to be surrounded by people who speak it. Studying the grammar can help, but the successful mastery of a language results in the internalization of the grammatical rules (Webb 2013:451).

Of course, the best way to learn a language and to become fluent in it is to be immersed in it and the culture of which it is both an expression and a reflection. But, there is no guarantee that even if the grammatical rules are being obeyed in speech, they will be learnt explicitly. This is not a problem, in and of itself, someone can still express what they want to say, can make themselves understood and even teach others to speak the language. It does, however, become a problem if nobody knows the grammatical rules explicitly enough to recognise when they are being broken, or simply changed over time. This may not significantly alter the language in one go, but over time it will. Academic theology is then tremendously important as a counter-balance to the theology which is happening colloquially, so to speak. In order to fulfil its task, it needs to be able to understand and interpret the language and concepts which are spoken and used by the Christian people who are teaching others how to speak the language of Christianity. I did not fully comprehend the importance of this myself until I went to a crochet class last year. I had not crocheted before, but I can knit. As I was used to holding knitting needles, that is the hold I had to use for crochet because my hands were conditioned to that movement. I was able to do everything the instructor asked of me and the work I produced by the end of the class was acceptable but I had no idea what any of her instructions meant, nor how they related to paper pattern we had all been

given. The result was that although I was successful in the class, I knew only how to make a long chain of crochet loops and could not get any further.

For someone who has argued for the use of empirical data from audience responses, it is a positive thing for theologians to reflect on what Christian communities are doing, how they are living out and articulating their faith. The empirical data, however, demonstrates it is also vital to know what other narratives worlds are impinging upon their Christian speaking, for these too will shape and inform the way in which they articulate their faith. Furthermore, while they may be fluent speakers, the grammatical rules must be made explicit to them because otherwise, over time, their ability to teach others the language of Christianity will be eroded and those who are learning it for the first time will not be able to become independent, mature and creative speakers of the language nor be able to use it well to interpret the world. As part of its task theological methodology needs to take these things into account.

Chapter Seven

Theology and the sacred; theology and gender

> **'**At the end of it you turn the TV off and go back to your real life.'
> (**Interviewee 3: LE1**)

The central questions this research sought to answer concerned the way in which participants interacted with the programmes they viewed and what this revealed about both about the processes of 'meaning-making' and the particular categories which emerged from the empirical as important in their conversation. I argued, in the last chapter, there is a case to be made for the contribution serious and informed engagement with popular culture can offer to theology, not least as a means of interpreting the 'signs of the times' (Jobling 2010: 2 and Ward 2005: 2). In this final chapter, having made that argument and established what was disclosed by the data analysis, I will demonstrate, in relation to two areas of theological inquiry, why paying attention to contemporary meaning-making in relation to popular culture provides fruitful avenues for theology. Watching television involves more than simply turning it on, watching it and then turning it off and returning to real life. Studying what people do with it makes perceptible things which are important to them in 'real life' and are, therefore, of theological interest and significance.

First, I will discuss Edward Bailey's concept of 'implicit religion' (Bailey 1998), bringing it alongside the work of Gordon Lynch on the 'sociology of the sacred' (Lynch 2012). I will argue that although implicit religion has been used in relation to Doctor Who, with a whole issue of the associated journal, *Implicit Religion*, being dedicated to the programme in 2015, ultimately, from a theological perspective Lynch's sociology of the sacred proved to be a more helpful conceptual framework in relation to the data. Then, I will go on to use one of the categories, gender, as an example of how something which has been identified as sacred in contemporary discourse within the analysis of the data, may usefully contribute to theological inquiry. Here I will engage with concepts from Sally McFague (1987) and Janet Martin Soskice (2005) concerning the language used for God and for the human relationship with God.

Theology, implicit religion and the sacred

Some of the original questions for the research had been couched in terms of the use of 'implicit' and 'explicit' religious imagery and metaphors, so when analysing the data I turned to the work of Edward Bailey and his concept of 'implicit religion', to investigate whether it offered illumination. I discovered that as well as being used by Chris Deacy in his book, *Christmas as Religion: Rethinking Santa, the Secular and the Sacred* (2016), there was also a whole issue of the journal *Implicit Religion* (Vol 18 (4)) in 2015 which was dedicated to *Doctor Who*. In the next section, I argue that although 'implicit religion' as a theoretical concept appeared to offer much to the analysis, ultimately, the data mitigated against its being wholly useful. Reaching this conclusion itself, however, offered some valuable insights and pointed in the direction which was finally more productive in conjunction with the data, Gordon Lynch's concept of a sociology of the sacred. At this point it is helpful to outline what 'implicit religion' is conceptually, in order to frame my argument.

Implicit Religion

The term 'implicit religion' was coined by Edward Bailey (who from November 1998 until his death in 2015 was the editor of the *Implicit Religion* journal) in 1968. Determining precisely what is meant by 'Implicit Religion' is, however, far from straightforward because like the term 'religion' in the contemporary British context, as noted previously, it is not an easily defined concept. This is even more the case because it is 'predicated on the notion' that 'the realm of the secular and of ordinary life may contain unacknowledged and unarticulated religious elements' (Deacy 2016: 125). Bailey himself explained in *Implicit Religion: An Introduction* (1998) that while the word 'religion' might still provoke 'protests', these were less likely in the 1990s than the 1960s and keeping it, instead of using 'alternative expressions, such as 'ultimate concern (s)' or 'value(s) systems' encouraged those using it to 'try and place his or her study, methods and findings, within the overall and challenging context of the study of religion' (Bailey 1998:11). He was also clear that there was no direct allusion, when using the concept of 'implicit religion', with 'being implicitly Christian' (Bailey 1998:10). Thus, 'implicit religion' seeks to take seriously the way in which elements of 'the religious' are still present and observable in the contemporary secular world in

patterns of behaviour and activity even when 'the religious' remains 'implicit' because it is not acknowledged or articulated by those participating. Bearing this definition in mind, as noted earlier, 'implicit religion' has been used very productively and insightfully recently to reflect on popular culture and the role of religion in contemporary British Society (see Deacy 2016). Indeed, as noted earlier a whole edition of the journal *Implicit Religion* was dedicated to *Doctor Who* in 2015. Andrew Crome (who edited this issue) writes, 'science fiction has often been presented as an ideal lens through which to examine the presence of implicit religion in contemporary society' (Crome 2015: 439) But he goes on to admit in the same article, while he 'appreciates the contribution of implicit religion to the studies of popular culture', he does so, 'without fully subscribing to the concept myself' (Crome 2015:439).

When brought into dialogue with the empirical data the concept of 'implicit religion' therefore created a space in which 'religious content' did not have to be confined by a functionalist understanding of religion. 'Implicit religion' allowed that what is deemed religious content in this research may be shaped by the responses of the viewers themselves, even if they would not consider themselves to be involved in something described as 'religious'. I acknowledge the debt my thinking in this area owes to the work of Chris Deacy in *Christmas as Religion: Rethinking Santa, the Secular and the Sacred* (2016), and particularly his chapter on 'Christmas as the Site of Implicit Religion'. It assisted greatly in developing my understanding of how 'implicit religion' as a scholarly concept could be used in relation to the empirical data, while also highlighting the problems which have been identified with it.

Bailey identified 'implicit religion' as 'a hypothesis, with a hermeneutic aim' (Bailey 1998:12). Its purpose was not to provide an alternative religion or to imply that everything is implicitly religious, nor to suggest everyone is religious; rather it is to open up the reciprocal possibilities, where alongside acknowledging that secular scholarly approaches have something to offer to the study of religion, religion is given the same space to engage with the secular (Bailey 1998:12 & 70 and Deacy 2016:128). Bailey wanted to acknowledge that what is commonly called 'religious' and what is commonly regarded as 'secular' in contemporary society are not discrete. He posited

that there is far more crossover between the two than has been allowed for and, furthermore, that in this middle ground between what is traditionally categorised as sacred or profane, is the 'ordinary'. A place where, 'the use of religious language…simply goes unnoticed' because it is being used in reference to something commonplace (Deacy 2016:127). This use of religious language in an 'ordinary' context is one way in which the concept of 'implicit religion' assists in drawing attention to an important aspect of the empirical data here. It highlighted the way in which the 'religious' language of 'sacrifice', 'redemption', 'worship' and 'salvation' was used by participants when they were talking about the Doctor, his actions and motivation and the responses of other characters to him. This language was 'unhooked' to use Pete Ward's phrase (2011) from its original Christian theological roots, nevertheless, it was deemed the appropriate language by participants to talk about the Doctor, with his perceived god-like qualities. Yet, it was used alongside the recognition that this is a character with flaws, an imperfect God, with, as one academic has noted, an element of the monstrous (Miller 2013).

Conceptually 'implicit religion' did, therefore, create a space in which the data could 'speak'. This was chiefly in relation to those things which were not 'religious' in terms of functionalist understandings of religion, but still had 'religious' resonances, or in acknowledging that even when the participants themselves might not label their discussion as 'religious', it could be analysed as having 'implicitly religious' elements; however, problems were also encountered with its use. The most fruitful place to start with the concerns which arose is the three categories Bailey himself used to define 'implicit religion' (Bailey 1998); they are 'commitments', 'integrating foci' and 'intensive concerns with extensive effects' (ibid). I admit to finding Bailey's own description of these categories more than somewhat opaque. I understand them as follows: first, 'commitments' concerns the individual. It may suggest simply a sense of 'self-conscious and deliberately willed, individual decisions' but for Bailey it also includes that which 'can be…entirely unconscious, unknown even to their owner' until something happens which draws attention to them; these 'commitments' are shaped by environment and inherited culture to the extent they go unnoticed (Bailey 1998:17). Second, 'integrating foci' which are 'those focal points that integrate wider areas of life' (Bailey 1998:18); for Bailey this category is about encompassing,

> every width and depth of human interaction, from the individual and personal, through the familial and the face-to-face, to the social, societal, corporate, and species (ibid:18).

So, 'implicit religion' is a capacious category, reflecting on the whole of human life and human relationships and allowing for the way in which those interactions all have the potential to be 'implicitly religious'. Third, Bailey talks about 'intensive concerns with extensive effects' (Bailey 1998:18). Here again, Bailey is concerned that there should be no 'restriction of reference' (ibid:18).

> He is against any attempts to compartmentalize religion in such a way that it can only be thought to operate in specific spheres of life, as if one is either doing something 'religious' or 'profane' at any one moment (Deacy 2016:136).

This refusal to agree to separation between the 'religious' and 'secular' or the 'religious' and 'profane', was very useful in examining the empirical data, precisely because watching television does not often fall directly into the category of being something 'religious' and therefore finds itself categorised as 'secular' or even 'profane'. It also, although I found the three categories Bailey outlined hard to grasp, offered some insight into the way in which the participants 'commitment' and concerns may be revealed. And yet, there remained several distinct problems in relation to this study. First, as the volume of *Implicit Religion* (2015) dedicated to *Doctor Who* demonstrates, to claim that the programme is implicitly religious (even if it did appear after the research took place) is not, of itself, original. There has been plenty of reflection on the intersection between *Doctor Who* and religion, and examples of scholarly articles have made, and continue to make, the assertion to a greater or less degree that there are religious symbols, narrative elements and resonances in the programmes (Amy-Chin 2010; Wardley 2013:Johnson 2013;Larnsen 2013; Miller 2013; Waltonen 2013). Here 'implicit religion' capaciousness is again useful because these observations with regard to religion are not all from a Christian viewpoint; the scholars here perceive other religions or consider whether the programme itself

(narrative content and/or programme makers) are sympathetic or hostile to a religious 'reading' of the programmes. It is also vital to note that there are voices arguing that *Doctor Who* is resolutely scientific, materialist, and/or humanist and consequently non-religious (or even anti-religious) in its stance. Equally, there are those who will assert that the viewpoint changes with the author of script or whoever is the producer/programme runner at the time.

To have empirical evidence that 'implicit religion' can be observed, not just from the perspective of writing about the programme content or authorial intention, but also from the way in which the discussion panel participants responded is a different contribution to the conversation about the programmes. As has been said, 'implicit religion' assisted in analysing the data but, whilst acknowledging that the data does demonstrate the programmes viewed to be 'implicitly religious', the question to which I kept returning remained insistent. From a theological perspective, what does the assertion that the participants were engaged, at some points in their discussions, in conversation which could be categorised as 'implicitly religious' contribute?

'Between Sacred and Profane' (Lynch 2007)

In trying to resolve the question posed above, Deacy's discussion of 'implicit religion' in relation to Christmas (2016) provided a way of mapping the contours, both of the use of 'implicit religion' and the difficulty which simply labelling the activity of the participants as 'implicitly religious', was presenting. Deacy makes the point referring to *Christmas Junior Choice* and using the work of Karen Pärna on the internet, that it can be considered 'through the lens of Implicit Religion' even though it neither comes from a particular religious tradition nor is it serving one (Deacy 2016:136).

> Indeed, for Pärna, the 'veneration of the Internet as sacred originates from the mundane domain of journalism, the business and financial world, and futurist bestsellers' (cited in Deacy 2016:136).

‘Implicit religion’, according to Deacy’s reading of Bailey, is concerned with more than finding what might be ascribed as religious in unexpected contexts. He is concerned with the whole of human life and not a part of it which is pre-determined as religious.

> It is this absence of a pre-set agenda or delineation of religion which for Bailey is pivotal and is closer to how religion is *lived* for most people anyway. Rather than bracketed out from the rest of life he correlates ‘being religious’ with ‘being human’… (Deacy 2016:137).

So, for Bailey being religious is not about belonging to a particular group or undertaking particular practices. Deacy expands this by referring to an article by Gollnick saying it is about,

> what ultimately reflects ‘the strongest motivations and commitments around which people organize their mental and spiritual lives’ …. Anything, in other words, which gets to the hub of ‘the less obvious and less conventional aspects of religion’ (cited by Deacy 2016:138).

Deacy notes that for Bailey, ‘we can learn about people’s commitments and values better through religious categories and lenses than by simply restricting ourselves to what he calls ‘unrelievedly *secular* understandings of the secular’ (Deacy 2016:139). While not wishing to stick with ‘unrelievedly secular understandings of the secular’ (ibid), Deacy’s discussion of ‘implicit religion’ in relation to Christmas, taking in as it does much other reflection on the concept, including a number of critiques (not least Douglas Davies’ that it is ‘one way of talking about the data of social anthropology and not of theology’ (cited in Deacy 2016:137), allowed me to recognise the way in which when talking about ‘implicit religion’, the sacred and the religious appear to be conflated. This gave the key to unlock the gateway between asserting that from the perspective of the empirical data, the participants were engaged in something which was ‘implicitly religious’ to begin to contemplate what that means; not by sticking to ‘unrelievedly secular understandings of the secular’ (Deacy 2016:137) nor by

categorising the participants 'strongest motivations and commitments' as 'implicitly religious' (Deacy 2016: 138) but by using the argument put forward by Gordon Lynch (2010) for differentiating a sociology of the sacred from a sociology of religion.

As is usual for Gordon Lynch, his proposal in *The Sacred in the Modern World: a Cultural Sociological Approach* (2012), is tightly argued and well-theorised and to rehearse his complete case here is not possible. There are, however, a number of things which it is pertinent to note. First, Lynch critiques his own earlier use of 'functionalist' understandings of religion, which he now views as too narrow and embraces a more 'reflexive' approach. Second, while he maintains his interest in the way in which 'socially significant sources of meaning and value' circulate 'within increasingly de-Christianized societies', he also recognises that work which has taken place on emerging religious and spiritual expressions has often focussed on 'relatively marginal' 'groups and practices' within the wider cultural context of Western Europe and North America (Lynch 2012:4). Thirdly, given his earlier interest in and enthusiasm for popular culture, here Lynch uses factual case studies from the Irish Industrial Schools and the BBC's decision not to air a Disasters Emergency Committee appeal for Gaza, rather than popular culture. Finally, Lynch notes that while religious communities and their traditions often provide the basis for what is considered sacred in contemporary society, religion as a category cannot encompass the sacred because there are other things which fall outside it and yet, in Lynch's view are still considered sacred and which it is unhelpful to categorise as 'religion'. He identifies, 'gender, human rights, the care of children, nature and the neo-liberal marketplace' as having sacred significance in contemporary culture and society. Conversely, there are also 'religious symbols and narratives' which 'serve as backdrops or cultural references with little normative significance for their audiences' (Lynch 2012:5). This is significant for this study because one of the things which Lynch counts as currently possessing 'sacred' social and cultural significance, gender, also arose as a key category in the empirical research. In his example of the Irish Board Schools, Lynch interprets how two different sacred discourses were in pitched against each other with one dominant and the other subjugated, as the concept of the sacred Irish Catholic nation was allowed to supersede that of the child (Lynch 2005: pp54-86).

Lynch starts with the an obvious but often overlooked point, particularly in academic and theological spheres, 'much of our everyday lives is lived out through mundane activities and concerns' and 'most of our actions are unreflexive, negotiated through mundane spaces…objects…skills so familiar we are barely conscious of them' (Lynch 2012:1). Watching television is for many people one of these mundane, everyday activities, something of which they are, at least on occasions, barely conscious. Yet, Lynch goes on to argue, there are also profound moments, both personal and corporate, which can disrupt the ordinary and every day and provoke an awareness of the sacred impinging on contemporary existence. For Lynch, being aware of and understanding these sacred commitments is essential for a holistic and effective recognition of how they shape and influence 'our feelings and institutional practices' and their role 'in the formation of subjectivities' (Lynch 2012:3). He contends that 'gender, human rights, the care of children, nature, and the neo-liberal marketplace all have sacralised significance in modern social life' but that labelling them and categorising them as 'religious' phenomena is not necessarily helpful (Lynch 2012: 5). Equally, although 'discourses and symbols of religion circulate through contemporary culture', they do so 'in ways that do not necessarily have normative significance or draw together a community of adherents in the way sacred forms do' (Lynch 2012:5) For Lynch, while 'religious symbols and narratives' may continue to be present in contemporary media, they do so with 'little normative significance for their audiences'; meanwhile what he calls 'sacred forms' have a more structured and normative presence. This distinction captured for me the sense of theological disquiet I had encountered in using Bailey's 'implicit religion' in relation to the empirical data. It articulated the sense in which while labelling something things, like the use of language in relation to the Doctor, implicitly religious, was theologically generative; in relation to others it was either a mis-categorisation or a dead-end. When the participants were talking about gender, to categorise what they were doing as implicitly religious would be to wilfully ascribe a set of commitments, integrating foci and extensive concerns to their conversation which was entirely absent. It would be fundamentally misleading. Yet, to say that their discussion evidenced a concern with gender and equality which could be observed and reflected upon critically as sacred, in the terms Lynch uses, as a normative structure of society, was feasible and appropriate. Thus, as Lynch argues, 'the sacred' provided a theoretical means of engaging in social and cultural analysis (Lynch 2012: 9). It is worth noting here, Lynch is clear in his analysis that he is reversing Durkheim's 'theory

of the origin of sacred', stating that rather than society generating the idea of the sacred, it is instead the sacred which 'generates the idea of human society as a meaningful, moral collective' (Lynch 2012: 128). In order to be able to observe and reflect with these sacred commitments, it is necessary to 'disrupt' and create critical distance because it is hard to perceive that which one experiences as normative in shaping reality.

The sacred became, therefore, a concept which was very helpful in thinking about the data. This is especially important where it was impossible and wholly inappropriate to ascribe implicitly religious significance to categories which plainly fell beyond any sense of religious affiliation altogether, and yet, which were seen to normative in the way in which they shaped and informed the world view and structure of feeling which was revealed through the empirical data. This said, it was also important to bear in mind Lynch's observation that 'caution should be taken in assuming that particular structures of the sacred are universal across all times and all places' (Lynch 2012:133). The empirical data generated through this study come from a British cultural context in relation to a British cultural product. Lynch also makes another significant point for this research,

> Even religious groups who believe themselves to be oriented simply around a particular sacred form of their tradition are in reality influenced by other sacred forms such as nationalism, human rights, or the care of children (Lynch 2012: 134).

This also proved a concept which was theologically creative and generative because it did not hitch theology and religion together in a way which excluded secular and mundane interpretations of the data. Thus the interactions of the participants about their personal experiences, their reactions to ordinary things like traffic jams, confined spaces, relationships between parents and their children, the dynamics between the Doctor and his companion are all accorded value, even if it is inappropriate to label them as 'religious', even 'implicitly'. In his earlier argument about meaning-making,

which I used in Chapter 4, Lynch was concerned that 'more mundane readings' (Lynch 2009) be given space, rather than theology assuming existential meaning-making was taking place through popular culture. While Lynch himself, at that stage did not identify what those 'more mundane' readings of popular culture might be, his later concept of the sociology of the sacred (Lynch 2012) has proved crucial in opening up the space for the empirical data. The 'more mundane' connected to the participants' ordinary, everyday lives, their experiences and their affectivity, could be perceived in their conversations in the panel groups. These things could then be reflected on theologically, generating the space for engagement between popular culture and theology, without recourse to the suggestion that what the participants were doing was 'implicitly religious'. This is vital, because, it means that theology can enter into dialogue with what is sacred, without the baggage of having already labelled it 'implicitly religious. This is a conceptual error, because it obscures the ordinary discursive operations of culture and society in the British context by reconnecting them to religious foundations. Although Bailey argues that the conceptual baggage connected to the word 'religious' can be overcome, when used in conjunction with the empirical data, ultimately, I was uncomfortable with ascribing to the participants a term which implied conceptually something which was not part of their worldview. Lynch's sociology of the sacred provided a conceptual language which did not impose on the data but which did allow it to make visible the operations of meaning which were present.

In the next section I will consider some of the concepts Lynch identifies as sacred in contemporary society and which emerged as a significant code within the data, gender. I will bring it into conversation with theology as a worked example of the potential for mutually beneficial dialogue.

Theology and gender

As I have shown, gender and the way in which discussions of the relationship between the Doctor and his companions (in the case of these episodes Martha and Donna) demonstrated an understanding of the power dynamics at play in the representation of a

male/female relationship, alongside the use of particular tropes for male/female characteristics and behaviour, emerged as a significant category from the empirical data. One quote from a panel group will serve here to illustrate the point which has been made extensively in an earlier chapter.

From the panel group discussion in Cambridge:

> 'It's quite a (.) traditional male female pairing in that they always rely on him to get them out of trouble (**Interviewer**: mm) he's the one that knows what to do and he's the one that can control (**Interviewee** 2:mm) when they come back shouting, crying and worrying.' (**Interviewee 7**: **WH3**)
>
> A bit sexist in a way.' (**Interviewee 1**: **WH3**)

Yet, as has been shown in the earlier section on the empirical data this is not a simple 'reading' of misogyny in the programme; in conversation the participants recognised the complicating factors in the representation of this relationship while remaining alert to the power differential. It was articulated that the relationship between the Doctor and his companion is a 'complicated' one, as all 'human relationships are inherently', but perhaps especially those that 'don't fit in to a box…and the show had those relationships that are complicated that is a female male relationship, strong friendship, quite romantic ties but they don't' fit into boxes' (Interviewee 1: LE1).

In thinking then about how this category of 'gender' from the empirical data may best contribute theologically, I will take some time to locate it in theological study. In this section I will be using the informative introduction to *The Theological Study of Gender* by Tina Beattie (Beattie 2015). Here she makes the point that while theology has a long, and at one time at least, distinguished place in academic institutions, 'gender studies … is one of the most recent disciplines to emerge in the proliferation of intellectual perspectives that is characteristic of postmodernity' (Beattie 2015:32). Meanwhile, in the same essay Sarah Coakley is quoted acknowledging that gender studies itself is not only 'predominantly secular' but 'often actively anti-theological in

tone' (Beattie 2015:32). From a theological perspective Coakley does admit that there are 'many theologians who are resistant to issues of gender and sexuality', she also asserts, 'those who take such questions seriously are among the most radical and intellectually rigorous of contemporary theologians' (Beattie 2015:32). It is worth noting at this point that it is not only theology which has grappled with giving 'gender' prominence, Mia Lovheim notes a lack of visibility for research on 'gender' or 'the experiences of women' in the field of media, religion and contemporary culture too (Lovheim 2013:4). In terms of this research, however, there are significant changes in a postmodern intellectual environment which Beattie notes as advantageous to the intersection of gender and theology. The first is a movement away from 'modern metanarratives about the universality of reason and the progressive nature of scientific knowledge' towards the recognition of the contextualised and narrative ways of knowing with a consequent plurality of 'ways of knowing' which creates the space for 'different cultural and religious' viewpoints to be 'accommodated', while acknowledging that this means any claim to universality will have to be relinquished (Beattie 2015:33). The second flows from the first, the progress 'from modern empirical or rationalist approaches to knowledge towards the more narrative approaches and contextual approaches' means that the role of language in forming and shaping 'knowledge and subjectivity' is affirmed and appreciated. Since this research is based on analysing the conversation that occurs in a group after watching programmes together and taking seriously that their discussion reveal something about their understanding of the world and meaning-making, this means there is a good fit between 'this postmodern perspective' Beattie outlines in her essay and this theological project; whilst also holding onto her assertion that while it is one 'which learns from its secular counterparts', there is also a place for 'insights from the perspective of faith' (Beattie 2015).

Rather than describing here any further the history of theology and gender, I want to examine how it relates directly to the empirical data and what emerges as important from it theologically. Beattie notes that theologians such as Coakley have demonstrated the way in which seemingly universal Christian doctrines and 'their anthropological, sacramental, and ethical applications' when viewed through the lens of 'gender' (which has been made 'visible' rather than 'invisible') are in fact deeply shaped by a male

perspective. Drawing attention to this, for Coakley, offers the opportunity to explore new viewpoints and indeed, even correct past misreadings which did not sufficiently take into account 'questions of desire, sexuality and gender' (Beattie 2015:33). The important thing to emerge here is the way in which the data supports the concept of reading a text or a situation or a programme through 'a lens', in this instance 'gender', while noting that this reading itself is by no means straightforward. The empirical data demonstrates, via the language used by participants, that what some of them noticed and expressed in conversation was an awareness of the dynamics of 'gender' and 'power' within the programmes. The language they used identified what for some was a 'traditional', 'sexist' or at least 'unequal' relationship between the Doctor and his companion, who in both episodes were respectively male and female. Without asserting that every person in each group would have subscribed to this viewpoint or the use of this language, it can be said that in each group the nature of the relationship between the Doctor and his companion was remarked on. It can also be noted that participants did this through a 'lens' which foregrounded aspects of the gendered nature of this relationship, particularly in respect of the power dynamic between the Doctor and his companion. Martha, although training to be a Doctor herself, is viewed as someone who is much more willing to agree with the Doctor, as someone who 'hero worships' him. Furthermore, her storyline of unrequited love for the Doctor annoyed some participants and undermined her characterisation. One participant particularly found it hard to reconcile her experience of those training to be doctors, and the portrayal of Martha precisely because the character finds it so hard to assert herself. This was not the experience of the person in question with the trainee medics she knew. In contrast, Donna, who is 'older', is described as 'bolshie', 'ready to stick up for herself', to argue with and influence the Doctor when she thinks it is necessary but it is her very loudness, her tendency 'to shout and strop to get her own way' which annoyed another participant, who wanted the character to be allowed to 'use her brain more' which would presumably for her meant less shouting and being stroppy. Meanwhile another person remarked that the character 'wasn't really doctor material'. For this participant, it was Martha's character which was viewed as a step forward, because she was permitted to think things through, to be a female character 'allowed to be intelligent and be strong' with her own mind.

I have returned to the empirical data here, through the use of small quotes because I wanted to show clearly that while the nature of the relationship between the Doctor and *his* companion is viewed through the lens of contemporary concerns regarding gender, and judged wanting by some participants; the language used by the same participants also displays gendered attributes and judgements (relating to class and education, although as noted earlier significantly not race). This, in turn, supports the 'intersectionality' which Beattie highlights 'as a discourse that approaches questions of subjectivity, justice and politics' as an array of 'complex and volatile markers of identity and otherness' (Beattie 2015:37). Beattie herself notes that for the theologian seeking to engage with these matters the 'proliferation of theories', the complexity of 'claims and counter-claims' may cause them to pause and question why they would wish to continue, especially when there is resistance to 'their insights' and inquiry itself 'sometimes tells us more about the narcissism of academics than about the realities of ordinary human lives' (Beattie 2015: 37). She argues, however, along with Coakley, that gender brings theology back to 'its neglected roots', offering 'new insights and interpretations' (Beattie 2015: 38).

> The linguistic turn, involving as it does the rediscovery of the power of language to shape the world, can be interpreted as a call to rediscover the forgotten wisdom of the Christian theological tradition and, even if it is spurned, to hold out to gender theorists the possibility of dialogue with theology with regard to questions of transcendence, materiality, hope and meaning (Beattie 2015:38).

In the final section of her chapter entitled 'Redeeming Gender', Beattie argues that much of the non-theological 'gendered discourses of postmodern theory' remain unconnected to lives and experiences of 'ordinary people', especially those excluded from participating in the 'gendered parodies of postmodern metrosexuals' (Beattie 2015:46). Theology can offer to the conversation 'not the language of eternity and metaphysics but the language of materiality and incarnation' (Beattie 2015:46). In this study the situation the participants found themselves in, discussing two episodes of *Doctor Who* with people they had only just met was unusual, but the programmes were ones which were first broadcast during the popular early evening slot on Saturday night

British television; certainly, an anticipated aspect of the schedule by some, but an 'ordinary' one in many ways too. They are part of a series which has great longevity, as well as a huge fan base and a place in popular culture which is regularly referenced elsewhere in language, image and trope. Over many years *Doctor Who* has been part of their ordinary Saturday night routine, so conversation about the programmes is part of ordinary, everyday life. What this reveals is that aspects of the concerns of gender studies and theory, to make visible the structures and assumptions which have supported disparity are part of the ordinary, everyday discourse used in interpreting what has been viewed; 'gender' is one of the lenses through which the characters in the story are perceived, particularly in relation to the exercise of power and agency. Alongside this, however, while what is 'traditional' or 'sexist' or 'unequal' is recognised as such in the male/female relationship between the Doctor and his companion, there are is also information gleaned from the language and concepts used by the participants, which indicates residual assumptions about gender and about particular character traits and behaviours relating to being male or female.

Describing a positive and transformative role for theology, Beattie begins 'language clothes the naked human animal with gendered personhood made in the image God', she goes on to argue that theology can open up creatively and imaginatively vistas which flow between and are not confined by these 'two poles' (Beattie 2015:47). In this next section I want to bring what I have gathered concerning 'gender' from the data analysis into conversation with the work of two different feminist theologians. I will argue that there is further creative and imaginative dialogue to be done, if feminist theologians want to make the contribution they envisage in terms of offering hope and meaning in a culture which frequently lacks a sense of the transcendent and is wrestling with how to live with its own materiality.

I want to work here with Sallie McFague's *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (1987), and I must begin by acknowledging the debt I owe to the introduction to this work which is provided by Vander Lugt (2018). McFague offers new models and therefore new language to express who God is and therefore to relate to God because the traditional ones are 'patriarchal, hierarchical, and triumphalistic

models that perpetuate habits of domination and submission…' (Vander Lugt 2018:763). For McFague the role of theology is to locate and articulate, Vander Lugt asserts, 'images and metaphors of the God-world relation that fit a particular cultural climate' (ibid 2018: 764). This process is one which both 'ongoing' and probationary, only those metaphors which survive become theological models (ibid 2018: 764). As has been argued in the previous chapter, McFague's assertion concerning the role of the theologian again relies upon them being skilled not only in the Christian tradition but also in interpreting the current cultural context, so that they are both grounded and imaginative, formed by the Christian narrative and yet still showing characteristics of the faith and God about whom they speak, in being creative and generative. Vander Lugt argues McFague does not want to displace personal models for describing the God-world relationship altogether because the personal is 'often the most imaginatively potent' and they 'support a view of a God who is 'radically relational, immanental, interdependent, and noninterventionist' (cited in Vander Lugt 2018: 765). She therefore uses the model of 'three of the most basic personal relationships: mother, lover, and friend' (Vander Lugt 2018:765). It is the 'lover' and 'friend' aspects of this model which I want to explore here in relation to the data analysis and the category of gender. I will begin with 'friend' and as well as McFague's work, I will also engage with Janet Martin Soskice's essay on 'Friendship' in *Fields of Faith: Theology and Religious Studies for the Twenty-first Century* (2005).

Theology, gender and friendship

As has been noted earlier, the companion(s) have always been an integral part of the *Doctor Who* world. During the Russell T. Davies era, the narratives themselves developed and encouraged the idea that the Doctor needed a companion, both to assuage the loneliness of a character who is (ostensibly) the last of their kind but also to be, as they have always been, a foil to the Doctor. Often the companion, as was remarked on by the participants in the group discussions, stands in the place of the audience; they are the ones to whom the Doctor explains 'the science' or his previous knowledge of a foe, they are the ones whose job it is to scream at the monsters and reach for the Doctor's hand when he says 'run' and they are the one who frequently

need to be rescued on their adventures by the Doctor. They are also, however, the ones who in their journey with the Doctor ask questions of the new worlds they visit, of the Doctor's actions and choices and sometimes, like good friends they are the ones who challenge his perspective or make him change his mind or course of action.

In some ways this vision of friendship between the Doctor and his companion(s) fits well with McFague's concept of God as friend. Vander Lugt (2018) in his summary of McFague's work identifies three ways in which she characterises friendship in relation to God, three 'paradoxes'. First, it is a relationship entered into freely which involves 'trust and commitment'; second, it is one in which God and human beings are orientated towards the 'same goal, namely, 'the well-being of the world'; third, although friendship occurs most naturally and spontaneously between children, in fact, mature relationships require characteristics of 'mutuality, reciprocity and, shared responsibility'. Thus, to be a friend of God is 'to be invited into a relationship of childlike trust and mature responsibility' (Vander Lugt 2018:767). The relationship between the Doctor and his companion(s) appears to have many of the same qualities; the companion must exhibit trust and commitment in relationship to the Doctor because they are being taken to new worlds, far away from the home and their safety ultimately relies upon him. Though their journeys may not always begin with the aim of 'the well-being of the world', the stories which are earthbound are usually predicated on this premise, while those which take place elsewhere in space and time often find their motivation in either 'saving' that planet or galaxy or the universe. It may also be, however, a smaller vision of simply ensuring the safety of the companion(s) which also results in a righting of something which has gone awry in space and time, usually resulting in violence and hurt to someone. There are occasions, as with *The Fires of Pompeii* where a fixed course of action in history means that the Doctor cannot save the entire situation and can only save the companion and perhaps a lucky few. This is where the third aspect of McFague's description of friendship comes to the fore, the sense of 'mutuality, reciprocity and shared responsibility' (Vander Lugt 2018:767).

> God shares with his friends and companions the responsibility to sustain and guide all forms of life. In traditional theology, this sustaining work is linked to

> God as Spirit, but McFague suggests that the model of God as friend has greater power because it is more personal and less 'ethereal, shapeless, (and) vacant' (Vander Lugt 2018:767)

It is here where the question of gender raised by the participants starts to complicate matters, because while avoiding the 'ethereal' and holding on to the 'personal', friendship, when it is embodied, then becomes gendered and the binary language and conceptuality of male/female bring to fore questions of power and agency. While Beattie may have hopes for the way in which 'theology springing from the graced creativity of contemplation opens our imaginations to the myriad possibilities of gendered loving and being that stream between the two poles of reproductive necessity', it is those two poles which characterise and shape the response to the Doctor, his companion and their relationship.

In *The Fires of Pompeii*, certainly, Donna Noble does share responsibility with the Doctor. She chooses to put her hand on the lever which will bring about the catastrophic Vesuvian earthquake, so that the Doctor is not doing this on his own, and she changes his course of action by begging him to save at least one family, which he does. There is still a sense, however, from the participants that this is far from an equal relationship and it is one which is characterised by their gendered descriptions, of a woman who is 'feisty', 'shouty' and not typically human doctor material. The friendship between the Doctor and the two companions in the episodes shown is a male/female relationship and the empirical data shows it is seen and understood through the lens of gendered expectations. Thus, close observation of the audience response opens up theologically the way in which while calling God 'friend' holds on to the importance of the personal in the relationship between God and human beings, it also, even when it seems to be freeing it the language from gender, does not necessarily disassociate the concept of the relationship of friendship from gendered expectations. Of course, if the 'friend' is linked, as it is by McFague to 'Mother' then that gives the relationship a different connotation, but not one which is freed from gendered expectations either.

I want to explore further the concept of 'friendship' in theology, alongside the empirical data and analysis and the category of gender, using an essay by Janet Martin Soskice. In *Friendship* (2012), Soskice explores briefly classical, early Christian, and medieval concepts of friendship. She touches on the work of C.S. Lewis in the mid-twentieth century and notes the way in which 'friendship' has been neglected recently in favour of 'love' by Christian authors and theologians. Soskice argues for its rediscovery, asserting the importance of the calling to be the 'friend of God' (Soskice 2005:181). She notes that ancient writers such as Cicero were confident that friendship was a universally important aspect of what it is to be a human being. Yet, it is clear from her survey of ancient writers that this universality is expressed in gendered terms, this is essentially male writers talking about friendship between men. Soskice quotes Cicero who lists the necessary 'qualities a friend must have' and he encourages those looking for friendship to pursue 'good men, loyal and upright, fair and generous, free from all passions, caprice and insolence, with great strength of character, frank, sociable sympathetic, candid, affable, genial, agreeable, wholly courteous and urbane' (Soskice 2005: 168). As she identifies, 'friendship is reciprocal – it involves at least two' (Soskice 2005:169). But, these two are not imagined as being a man and a woman.

Theologically then this presents a difficulty, because if traditional language about naming God is used, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in what way are women to participate in friendship with God? If personal but gender-neutral language is used such as 'friend' in naming God, precisely because friendship itself as a concept has a history of being gendered, it is not a neutral either. The empirical data demonstrates this, when it is applied to friendship between a man and a woman, or perhaps better between a woman and male being who is more than human. Friendship does involve two, but these two are rarely pictured as male and female. This inability to picture and portray a male/female platonic friendship is true in ancient writings but also well into the twentieth century, with C.S. Lewis, in the *Four Loves*, 'speaking throughout of 'male friendship' – since he believes friendship will in most societies and periods be between men and men or women and women' (Soskice 2005:171). For Lewis according to Soskice, men and women can share 'Affection' or 'Eros' but not the love which is friendship, even when they are in as close a relationship as marriage, this is still not how their relationship is characterised.

> Women are to all intents and purposes ruled out of this happy band. Friendships between the sexes easily and quickly pass into erotic love (even within the first half hour, according to Lewis!) unless, of course, the two are lucky enough to be physically repulsive to one another (Soskice 2005:171).

Crucially, this dynamic is also picked up as a subject of concern in the Doctor Who panel groups. It was remarked upon that after the relationship between the Doctor and his previous companion, Rose, which very definitely did have romantic elements of *eros* love, the relationship between the Doctor and his next two companions had to deal with and overcome this dynamic. For some of the participants the introduction of a romantic element between the Doctor and his companion, during the tenure of Rose as companion, was very much considered a distracting mistake on the part of the programme makers and writers, which they were pleased to see abandoned. It was also acknowledged, however, that this was easier said than done. Thus, for Martha, it was then a tale of unrequited love, which some of the participants found intensely irritating; while for Donna, it was a relationship where she and the Doctor were frequently mistaken for husband and wife, a relationship which they would both vehemently deny. It was also noted by participants that within this male/female dynamic in the narrative, an unequal relationship of adoration was replaced by one of disparagement. These things were recognised by the participants, and yet, while the relationship carried many of the elements of friendship, it was not described in those terms and it was seen as one which was unequal in many respects.

Soskice herself is wary of applying friendship to the Trinity.

> Christians can and do speak of the love flowing between the three persons of the Trinity but it would be unwise, in trinitarian terms, to say that the three 'persons' are friends of each other: that would be dangerously near to tritheism, although we might be able to say 'the Trinity is friendship' much as one says 'God is love' (Soskice 2005:170).

Soskice, however, want to hold onto the possibility of friendship with God, even if it is not the friendship of equals classically described – entailing 'reciprocity, equality and respect' (Soskice 2005:180). She charges C.S. Lewis with a lack of faithfulness to 'his scriptures', even if he was 'very nearly right' in having a sense that to claim God as friend was 'presumption' (Soskice 2005:180). Indeed, Soskice asserts that precisely because 'friendship is not based on shared perfection and is not static', then human beings may become friends with God. She uses words from Nicholas Lash to describe 'a creaturely dependence relearned as friendship' (Soskice 2005:180). Furthermore, as Soskice states, friends do not have to be the others' *alter ego*; they need to be most fully themselves for the friendship to flourish and for the possibility of encounter and transformation to take place. Thus, it is possible for friendship between God and humanity, or more correctly between the divine and a particular human being to happen; this relationship does not have to be one of equals, as with Moses who was called 'the 'friend of God', (Soskice 2005: 181) Soskice is not simply trying to say that friendship with God can happen, but also that it should be practised. In doing so she has made use of Buber and Rosenzweig. She ponders on whether they could now be called 'her friends' because she has been attempting to do more than '*listen to'* to them (Soskice 2005:181).

> In a palpable way I feel myself to have *been found* by their writings, addressed from across years. Like friends they change me and in this analogical way we can speak of friendship (Soskice 2005:181).

In *Doctor Who* while the Doctor may care about what happens to humanity in general, his companions share a special relationship with him. To those who become companions, this relationship is, as Soskice notes of friendship using Buber, one which comes 'as a surprise, a grace' (Soskice 2012:180). The companions are *found* by the Doctor and their relationship with the Doctor transforms their lives; as Soskice expects of friendship it is a relationship in which transformation takes place. Yet, in the end, the demands of production and or narrative, mean the Doctor remains the lonely wanderer. Soskice asserts friendship with God is possible Soskice and argues, friendship is a neglected category to which more attention should be paid theologically. The empirical

data and its analysis, have raised a number of significant points for theology if this work is undertaken, including not just the use of language but the conceptual baggage which comes with it and which is circulating within cultural discourses, even when the participants can identify and comment on power imbalances and gendered roles.

Conclusion

> If you want to use television for teaching somebody something, you have first to teach somebody how to use television (Umberto Eco cited in Parsemain 2016:73)

Introduction

In this Conclusion I will draw together the different aspects of this study, highlighting a number of important related points and drawing attention to the way in which understanding the use of television is important for theology. First, I will return to the methodological approach which was used and the choices which were made, connecting them to relevant aspects of the later chapters. Following this I will reflect on the theological conversation partners I have used, particularly Lindbeck and Lynch, attending to why their contribution has been significant to this study. In later chapters I have argued for television and audience responses to it to be taken seriously, not just to exemplify existing theological themes, but as a resource for theology. This argument has found its foundation in the analysis of the empirical data which did not evidence participants making meaning in a way which could be deemed directly theological but which, nevertheless, I have shown provided material which is of theological significance. Here I will reflect further on how and why this is the case. Finally, I will extend the example, introduced in Chapter 7 of how this may be used theologically in relation to friendship.

Methodological Concerns

One of the major critiques of the work of theologians in the area of popular culture has been that the relationship they have drawn between theology, expressions of popular culture and the way audiences are using them is that it has frequently failed to engage with what audiences themselves are making of popular culture. The decision to use empirical data has been central to this study and crucial to the conclusions drawn and so, here, I want to return briefly to those initial methodical choices. Of the available means of data collection (e.g. questionnaires, gathering information from online forums,

interviews) discussion groups were used because although artificial in nature, being a group of strangers gathered together by the researcher for a specific purpose, they allowed for the way in which engagement with television and the process of meaning-making is a collective and discursive activity rather than a purely solitary one. To further counter the criticism of incipient theological pre-conceptions grounded theory was chosen as the method to collect and do the initial analysis of the data because it does not require the proving or not of an initial hypothesis. Avoiding the constraints of working with a hypothesis was important in seeking to ensure that the data collection and analysis was designed to be open to interpretations which were non-theological.

There were aspects of grounded theory which were difficult to work with. In its purest form, as advocated by Strauss and Corbin (1990), there should not be any review of literature before the data is collected; for this thesis to be effective this was not possible because it was only in scoping the existing field that the nature of where the study should go became explicit. In terms of the data analysis, this restriction also became problematic because it was necessary to engage with further literature in the field of television and audience studies to make sense of the data. In addition, there are important things which have been learnt for future empirical work. This includes the use of video as well as audio recording to better capture group interactions and facial expressions. Alongside this, while grounded theory did provide a way of working which kept theological assumptions from obscuring other interpretations, it is a method which, in spite of its aspirations, is better suited to use where the context being examined is boundaried in some way or where there is a particular aspect of practice or action which is being examined and reviewed. For example, in a hospital or school where a specific process or interaction between colleagues, or carer and patient, or teacher and pupil, is being studied. Using grounded theory in virtually unchartered territory was difficult because it was during the process that its challenges and limitations became apparent. For further work in the area of theology and popular culture I would need to consider other social science methods. However, having learnt from the experience, the adapted form of grounded theory which was used here could be further refined. The reality of undertaking this empirical research was far from easy but it has also convincingly demonstrated that making statements about what people are doing needs to be evidenced by this kind of study. It cannot be claimed that people are doing theology

with popular culture explicitly if it is clear they are not. This research, however, has demonstrated that what people are doing with popular culture still possesses theological significance.

At the conclusion of this study what can be observed is the choice of discussion groups was a prescient one because the nature of meaning-making as collective and discursive, shaped by the existing narratives which participants brought with them into the room and shared with each other, has been a fundamental thread of the findings which is woven into the whole of the work. In *Fieldwork in Theology* (2015) Scharen asserts, making use of Bourdieu, that human beings are 'shaped' by the 'concrete social context' of their lives and this is turn is formed by the "*habitus"* or mode of being in the world , by which we navigate day-to-day life' (Scharen 2015:15). This study has argued that the world which Christians inhabit in contemporary British culture is one in which their daily lives are steered, certainly by the Christian story and the context of the church, but also one in which there are other formative narratives in play of which theology needs to be aware. The use of empirical data gathered using grounded theory established the means by which could be made explicit.

Theological Concerns

Lindbeck (2009) and Lynch (2012)

The conclusion the empirical data and its analysis demonstrated was that Bruce's assertion about the receding hold of discursive Christianity on the British cultural context was shown to be demonstrable (2002, 2010). When it came to bringing this empirical data and its analysis into conversation with theology, the choice of the main partners in that dialogue, Lindbeck and Lynch, was guided by their interest in the relationship between culture, language and the discursive narratives which shape the world and the conclusions they draw on how these areas are connected intimately and foundationally to meaning-making, belief, and action. Lindbeck (2009) is working from a specifically Christian theological perspective; while Lynch (2012) is concerned

with differentiating between a religion and the sacred from a cultural sociological viewpoint.

In order to discuss Lindeck and Lynch I want to bring in here the work of Christian Scharen (2015) in which he argues for the value of ethnographic research on the church and particularly the aspect which James K. Smith highlights in his Introduction, which is off value here,

> Scharen's questions seemed exactly right: if you're going to make grandiose claims about 'the church', isn't it fair to ask if any churches actually do what you claim? (Scharen 2015: xvii).

This research has not asked what churches are doing specifically, but it has explored the cultural context in which the contemporary British church exists and which shapes and forms those who are part of the church. The theoretical framework of Lindbeck's concept of a cultural-linguistic model for theology, in which it is the narrative life of the church which shapes and forms Christian identity and which is the place in which first-order theology is done (2009) has been examined and challenged from the standpoint of the empirical data. This shows that those who are Christians in a British cultural context dwell within multiple narratives worlds with diverse and competing discourses and in fact, Christianity may not be their first language at all. While the research has acknowledged the importance of Lindbeck's concept of a cultural-linguistic model of theology because it takes seriously the way in which language, culture, meaning-making, belief and practice interact, it has also questioned the picture it draws of a church and a subsequent theology isolated from the cultural and language of the world it inhabits.

Lynch (2012) also works with the way in which culture, language, belief and action are woven together. He has argued that though,

> Modernity has often been cast in academic and popular imagination as a secular age … even, if we accept that we live in more secular times than previous generations, we do not live in a de-sacralized age. (Lynch 2012:2)

Lynch has explored the importance of making the various sacred forms which govern and influence behaviour explicit in order to understand how they operate within culture and stated that without recognising how sacred forms operate 'our complex, pluralist societies are in danger of repeating cycles of conflict through sacred reflexes that do more harm than good' (ibid: 3). He has demonstrated the way in which different sacred forms intersect, sometimes to the detriment of those who are vulnerable because of the way in which narrative, language, belief and action are often operating invisibly or with a dominant sacred form holding power over another. Lynch explores the way in which this can occur through examining and interpreting 'the systemic abuse and neglect of children in the Irish Industrial School System' (Lynch 2012).

Using the work of Lynch, I have argued that the discourses which have been made visible through the empirical data can usefully be labelled as sacred, even if they are not religious. This is a vital distinction because it does not force the conversation and underlying belief systems which were observed from the empirical data into a religious pigeonhole while allowing that they still have theological significance. This theological significance lies in recognising and engaging with what is happening within culture at the level of belief and language, and subsequent practice and action in the world. This is then brought into dialogue with how it affects the formation of Christian identity in and through the church, as posited by Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic model of theology. While Lynch himself has moved on to exploring historical events such as the Irish Industrial School System, this thesis has continued to work with an expression of popular culture, *Doctor Who*, which deals with fictional narratives. It has used Lynch's argument about the value of identifying and making visible sacred discourses and forms and applied it to the empirical data, locating theological significance in the seemingly mundane interactions of the panel groups members. It is here that Lynch had identified in an earlier essay (2007a) an important point about allowing the mundane possibility in interpreting what audiences may be doing with popular culture; something which he

then, to some extent, appears to neglect in his later work on much larger, historical and factual events. Here the governing sacred forms are acknowledged, as are the ways in they operated for those participating in the events, but the role of the mundane withdraws from the horizon. In this study, however, his point became a central means of understanding and interpreting how the sacred was being expressed and why it had theological importance.

Further theological concerns – 'Found Theology: History, Imagination and the Holy Spirit' (Quash 2013) and Friendship

Quash (2013) makes the point that when theology works with the arts there can be a tendency merely to use the arts to illustrate an existing point, rather than to generate something new and creative theology. Quash himself seeks to counter this way of working by using the arts substantively in the development of his theology. I will make brief use of his work here in relation to my argument concerning television and theology. Quash is particularly concerned with the way in which the Holy Spirit may be leading those who engage with the arts into new understandings, new conceptualisations of the divine. As discussed earlier, using Fiddes (2009), unlike high art or literature, television cannot be granted a place as a theological resource on aesthetic grounds alone; it does not seek to be beautiful, or sometimes even truthful, however, this study argues that it can be a theological resource through the way in which it makes visible the cultural discourses and sacred forms which are operating in the British cultural context, often invisibly, informing and shaping the world in which people, including Christians live. It is of significance precisely because it pays attention to and does not ignore the mundane. It gives space to the ordinary, everyday meaning-making in which all people are engaged in order to make sense of the world. While, as Quash argues, there are elements of 'givenness' to Christian doctrine and theology there should also always remain a sense in Christian theology of continuing to find, rather than coming to the end of our 'searching' (Quash 2013: 284) because there is always more of God to discover. Quash asserts,

> My view is that no doctrine of the Holy Spirit, and no Christian theological account of history, that cannot survive exposure to the actual cases is worthy of the name (Quash 2013: 288)

I am arguing that the actual case here is television, as an expression of popular culture; that theology must be able to 'survive exposure' to the nature of television and the way in which it operates in our culture. Furthermore, I am arguing, that a doctrine of the Holy Spirit which cannot envisage its creative and generative action happening through popular culture and the meaning-making derived from it is impoverished and does not take seriously the theological importance of the mundane.

Finally, in this theological section of the Conclusion, I am going to return to the subject and theological category of friendship which I began to use in relation to Soskice's chapter on 'Friendship' (2005) in the last chapter of this thesis. Since Soskice was writing there has been a renewed interest in friendship as a theological category with a number of books and articles appearing (Summers 2009 and Thomson 2016). Here, I will briefly identify two aspects of friendship which this study point to as important for theology. First, friendship as a chosen relationship and second, friendship as a chosen relationship with 'the other'.

First then, friendship, as Hill (2015) states is a different type of relationship to familial ones because it is not a given, it is a chosen relationship. This is very much the case in *Doctor Who*, where the Doctor choses companions and where they, in turn, must make a choice to accompany the Doctor initially and then stay on board the TARDIS. It is a defining part of the Doctor's identity that a travelling companion (s) is required for this being who is the last of his race and is consequently alone. This chosen relationship is, therefore, one between beings who are different from each other and yet it provides something for each participant within it. It a mutually beneficial relationship which develops as the Doctor and companion spend time travelling together. It is also one which changes the companion's view of the world and universe and one in which, although the Doctor is portrayed as a being who is greater and more powerful than the

companion is many way, still affords them a crucial role to play too in offering help, fellowship and occasionally insight. Although ultimately the Doctor often ends up alone as companions move on, the need for that relationship of companionship remains.

Friendship is a chosen relationship, and this is true of the Christian faith; the gift of faith, of friendship with God through Jesus Christ is offered but human beings are given the freedom to respond to it. We do not have to choose to cross the threshold of a vehicle which travels through time and space, but we do have to choose to be in a relationship with God and journey with the divine through our lives. While faith is often described in familial terms, as becoming a child of God, or a brother and sister of Jesus Christ, thinking about friendship with God through Jesus acknowledges and gives due weight to the chosen, responsive nature of this relationship on our part.

Second, friendship is always to some extent with 'the Other', someone who is other than ourselves. However, often that 'otherness' can include much which is very similar (e.g. class, educational background, belief, race, gender, sexual orientation). Yet, there is the potential for more within the theology of friendship, and that more, according to Bonhoeffer, is intimately linked to our relationship with God and the way in which God is encountered through 'the Other' (cited in Borneman 2014). Thus, friendship as a theological category is about being friends with God through Jesus who reaches out to us in friendship, to the extent of the Incarnation. It is also about reaching out to others through our friendship with Christ, others whose difference from us may reveal something more of God to us. There is a chosen intimacy in friendship which theology encourages, perhaps even exhorts the Christian community to cultivate, with those beyond our current circle of knowledge or experience precisely because of the capacity for increased self-awareness and development. Borneman (2014) notes the impact of Bonhoeffer's time in Harlem and his experience of black church life, worship, and theology and the context of racism on his theology. As the white minister of an almost entirely black congregation in inner-city London I can bear witness to the vital role concrete, personal friendship across cultures, ages and experience has in nurturing and developing a broader theological perspective and a deeper encounter with God through Jesus. I am now far more aware of my own 'whiteness' and beginning to understand

what that means. From my experience and from the research I have undertaken while in this context, I want to push theologically the intentional cultivation of friendship with 'the other', recognising that true, authentic and open friendship has the possibility to transform, deepen and enhance our humanity and that this contributes to our experience of life in all its fullness. I want to examine the way in which the openness and vulnerability of friendship is truly incarnational. I also believe it would be useful to push back at the way in which a narrow focus on using discipleship as a key means to understand our relationship with Christ may overshadow the positive aspects of friendship with Christ. I would particularly like to examine further whether, when this aspect of our relationship with God through Christ is linked strongly to making more disciples and mission (Atkins 2010), it can diminish precisely those aspects of the relationship which are vital for developing engaging, authentic and transformational mission with those who we may see at first, as the 'other'.

The End

Lastly, I return to Parsemain (2016) and her argument for a modality of viewing television which she characterises as 'critical involvement'; the capacity to be close to the televisual text, emotionally involved in it and yet, able to also think critically about it. One of the things theology can take away from television is that those who are part of Christian communities, who are taking part in its liturgies and practices and being formed as Christians may not all be approaching their participation from the same modality of viewing so to speak; some may be referential viewers passively, even emotionally, involved in what is happening but not necessarily learning from it and others may be critical viewers, always maintaining a distance between themselves and what they are viewing. Now, it can be argued that there is an enormous difference between watching television and going to worship or taking part in the practices of the church and I would not dispute that. However, I am arguing that the conceptualisation of how things are learnt from what is taking place still holds traction. This is where the quote from Umberto Eco which I used at the beginning of the Conclusion comes to the fore, alongside the discussion at the end of chapter six about the role of theologians and the initial illustration about high fashion and bargain basement blue sweaters. The questions I have taken away from this research, as someone who has a foot both in the

camp of academic theology and working in a local church setting as a minster are these: How can the relationship between academic theology and the church be one which is symbiotic? How can theologians, who oversee the grammar of Christian language, ensure members of the church community are adequately equipped, with the grammar of their language so that they can pass it on to others? How can a sense of critical involvement be fostered which gives Christians the space to participate in their worship and practices and learn from them, and yet, think critically about how they relate to the other narrative worlds they inhabit? Using and developing the example of Soskice's work on the value of friendship in theology (2005) I have briefly begun to outline one area in which engaging with the questions which the work on television in this study offers to theology a resource for contemporary consideration. As Soskice became friends with her conversation partners, so I have argued theology needs to become friends with 'the other' which is television for its own development and benefit.

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Appendix One : Further information and questionnaire for *Doctor Who* study

As stated in the advert the screening will take place on Thursday 28 February 2013 between 2-5 pm.

Please be aware that continuing with the process of selection indicates that you are definitely available to attend that screening and discussion on this day and at this time. On the day there will be a short introduction, then two episodes of *Doctor Who* from the David Tennant/Russell T.Davies era will be shown. After this those participating will be asked to complete a short questionnaire and then take place in group discussion facilitated by the researcher about the programmes which they have just watched. This discussion will be recorded. Clearly, individuals in the room will be aware of each others' responses. However, each participant's questionnaire will be numbered so that it is anonymous and the information given will remain confidential and responses given during the discussion will be anonymised in the research by number. Participants will be asked in the questionnaire on the day if they are willing to take part in a further 1:1 one hour interview. Light refreshments of soft drinks and biscuits will be made available and participants will be recompensed £15 for their time. Payment will be made according to standard University of Leicester procedures, and will not be made on the day.

Questionnaire for potential participants in '*Doctor Who*' study

Name:

Email address:

Gender: Male/Female

Date of birth:

Have you watched *'Doctor Who'* before? Yes/No

Would you describe yourself as fan of '*Doctor Who*'? Yes/No

Do you belong to a political party? Yes/No

If yes, please say which:

Do you belong to a particular religious faith? Yes/No

I**f yes, please say which:**

Would you like to be considered for a second screening if you are not selected on this occasion?

Appendix Two: Brief introduction for screening on 28 February 2013

Welcome, thank you for coming this afternoon. Just going to spend a little bit of time introducing what is going to happen, what you can expect.
The focus of this study is to examine the potential relationship between popular culture and meaning-making in contemporary culture. *Doctor Who* has been chosen as a example of popular television culture.

Going to show you two episode of *Doctor Who* from the David Tennant/Russell T.Davies era. *'Gridlock* and *'The Fires of Pompeii' –*

Afterwards short break asked to fill in a questionnaire. Each participant's questionnaire will be numbered so that it is anonymous and the information given will remain confidential and responses given during the discussion will be anonymised in the research by number. Portion at the end indicating whether would like to be considered for a 1:1 interview will be detached before questionnaire information is logged.

Then going to have a group discussion about programmes just watched. This discussion will be recorded. For purposes of making a transcript later it would be helpful if we could observe little ettiquette, listening to each other, trying not to speak over the top of each other.

Clearly, you will each be aware of the others' responses, however, I would ask that we engage in mutual confidentiality e.g. Don't share outside this room exactly what someone else has said and as I've said your responses will be confidential and anonymised in research write up.

Any questions ???
If so, what?

Appendix Three:

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Title of Research Project: 'It's bigger on the inside': Meaning-Making in a Public Space. An investigation of the content and reception of Doctor Who: Series 2-4 and specials (2005-1 January 2010)

Brief Description of Research Project:

This study focuses on how people understand, experience and engage with popular culture texts, with a specific interest in exploring processes of meaning-making. It will examine the way in which popular culture texts are able to be classified as of philosophical, ethical, theological or political significance through the study of the ways in which viewers interact with and make use of a particular example of television culture, namely Doctor Who.

Researcher Contact Details:

Eleanor Jackson
c/o Vaughan Centre for Lifelong Learning
128 Regent Road
Leicester
LE1 7PA

egj2@le.ac.uk

Consent Statement:

I agree to take part in this research and am aware that I am free to withdraw at any point. I understand that the information I provide will be treated in confidence by the investigator and that my identity will be protected in the publication of any findings.

Name …….

Signature ……

Date ……

Appendix Four :Questionnaire for participants **Questionnaire No:**

Introduction and instructions.
Please complete the questionnaire below in pen. All responses will be kept confidential and anonymised in the final research write up. The information will be kept securely in a locked cabinet and completion indicates willingness for information from it to be stored/transmitted electronically **with names/email address/telephone numbers given at the end removed.**

QUESTIONS:

Gender: Male/Female

Date of birth:

Ethnic origin: Choose one option that best describes your ethnic group or background

White
1. English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British
2. Irish
3. Gypsy or Irish Traveller
4. Any other White background, please describe
Mixed / Multiple ethnic groups
5. White and Black Caribbean
6. White and Black African
7. White and Asian
8. Any other Mixed / Multiple ethnic background, please describe
Asian / Asian British
9. Indian
10. Pakistani
11. Bangladeshi
12. Chinese
13. Any other Asian background, please describe
Black / African / Caribbean / Black British
14. African
15. Caribbean
16. Any other Black / African / Caribbean background, please describe
Other ethnic group
17. Arab
18. Any other ethnic group, please describe

Have you watched *'Doctor Who'* before? Yes/No

If you answered 'yes' would you describe your viewing as:

Never (before today you have not watched an episode of *Doctor Who)*

Occasionally (you would watch it if you happened to sit down and nothing else was on)

Regularly (you like to see it but are not concerned if you miss an episode)

Always (every week if possible and catch up)

Would you describe yourself as fan of '*Doctor Who*'? Yes/No

Do you belong to a particular political party Yes/No

If yes, please state which:

Do you belong to a particular religious faith?

I**f yes, please say which and if you are willing, identify which denomination or branch?**

PLEASE NOTE THIS INFORMATION WILL BE REMOVED SO THAT ANSWERS REMAIN CONFIDENTIAL AND IF IT IS STORED/TRANSMITTED ELECTRONICALLY.

If you are happy to be contacted at a later date by the researcher if the possibility of further participation by individual interview arose, please enter your name and contact details below.
Please note a further payment of £10 will be made for your participation in this 1:1 interview.

Name:

Telephone Number:

Email address:

Appendix Five : Starter questions for group discussion.

Regarding the episode of 'Doctor Who' you have just watched:

Objective:

Who were the central characters?
What words or phrases from the programme have stayed with you?
Which scenes really spoke to you?
What images are still holding your attention?

Reflective:

What for you was the high point of the programme?
Who did you most empathise with?
What for you was the low point of the programme?
Was there any part of the programme you struggled with?
What surprised you?
How did you feel at the end of the programme?

Interpretive:

What were some of the key points in the programme?
What for you is the meaning of the programme – its central message?
How and where did you experience this message being expressed?
Do do these characters and their situation speak to your own life, if so how?
Were there any experiences in the programme that you found yourself relating too?
Having watched the programme did you learning anything which you didn't know before?

Decisional:

Did this programme challenge you and if so, how?
Was there any aspect of the programme you would have liked to see developed more?
What are you taking away to think more about?

Did you enjoy the programme?

Can you say why/why not? What appealed to you/or not?

Were there characters with whom you identified?

Were there characters you disliked?

Were there any points of contact for you between the world you saw on screen and your own experience? If so, what or how?

Are there parts of the episode you just watched which are going to stay with you?

If so, which?

In what ways, if at all, did the programme connect with or challenge your values, convictions or beliefs?