

THE SOUL MEN

Written by: Arnold T. Blumberg

Season 32/Story 9F

Reviewed by: Gary Phillips

This review contains spoilers.

Arnold T Blumberg's story, *THE SOUL MEN* takes place on the planet Pendryx Prime where religion and faith are run not only as a business but as a matter of life and death (quite literally!). It is a necessity to join anyone of a large number of faiths on a five-year renewal or be murdered by the 'Soul Men' of the story's title who are a form of secret police. The Ten Articles of Faith serve as both a Memorandum of Association and as a law within the 'Company'. Faith on Pendryx Prime is a free market Laissez Faire affair which would have delighted Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan.

Thomas Mekkal of The Church Of The Nucleonic Divinity receives a summons from the High Minister, believing that he is about to receive a promotion to Bishop, but instead The High Minister condemns him to death. At home, Mikkal's wife Alys is preparing a celebration dinner but soon the couple become fugitives, proving that on Pendryx Prime you are not safe even if you sign up to a particular faith.

The Doctor and Grae land, in the City's main thoroughfare, Pendropolis Market Place which is vividly described and puts one in mind of the bazaar in *SNAKEDANCE*.

The Doctor, Grae, Tom and Alys head for the Followers of the Blessed Light, a of resistance movement run by one Father Brinden. Brinden and his organisation are superbly realised, so much so that one cannot help but visualise the line from the Beatles song Eleanor Rigby;

"Father McKenzie, writing the words of a sermon that no-one will hear. No-one comes near"

In the early part of the story we see quite a few members of Pendryxian society who are paid up members of and devoted to their churches cruelly murdered by The Soul Men. These gory incidents seem to have little bearing upon the narrative, but all becomes clearer later. Tom, Alys and Brinden come over, it must be said as being rather one-dimensional. It is these minor characters such as Ander Selwyn, Quent Onnivar and especially Padar Hoytt who engage our sympathy at their brutal and shocking deaths rather than any of the story's main characters. An interesting viewpoint is that we see the way that religion is packaged and sold on Pendryx in such a way that one is reminded of Vengeance on Varos.

Religion here is also used as a means of control and enslavement. The High President notes the TARDIS's arrival and has it proclaimed as an article of divinity, which fell from the heavens "Which will be available from tomorrow for public worship" and soon models of it are being sold on the streets.

Unlike Tom, Alys and Father Brinden, The Doctor shows no fear when the Soul Men eventually turn up and takes the risk of admitting them in to the Church knowing full well that they are merely androids, the question is who is controlling them?

Crystals are also used as a manner of controlling the population as one, along the lines of the Metebelis 3 Crystal almost does Grae. Leaving her to take Tom, Alys and Father Brinden to safety, though not before placing them in the safety of the Zero Room where he knows they will be safe from The Soul Men, the Doctor decides that it is time to confront the High Minister and soon finds himself face to face with The Master.

Although frail, the Master is nearing the end of his life, the Soul Men have been keeping him alive by using the energies of his victims combined with Psionic feedback in order to enhance his life-force.

It is one of the few faults with this otherwise entertaining story that the Master comes over almost as blandly as he did in his later TV appearances in the 80s, when reading the story I felt no surprise at the revelation of who the High Minister was, yet the fact that he is still a victim of his near-



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conversion on the planet of the Cheetah people in *SURVIVAL* does add depth to his motivations here.

One thing which could be rather clichéd but comes over as extremely menacing is the way The Master waves the TCE around back in The Church and one is deeply saddened when Alys is killed. The TDWP Doctor remains as charming as ever, although his calm demeanour can sometimes make him seem just a little bland. My one criticism is that despite his initial bravery in telling the Master that he is unafraid of him, he does handle the solution to the story just a little too calmly, thus needing the reader to suspend belief in order to take it in.

The Soul Men has so far been an enjoyable story but rather ends in a clichéd fashion. Grae destroys the Church building with the Crystal with no little risk to her own life and the Master is apparently killed, only to emerge alive and well once the Doctor, Grae, Tom and Father Brinden have gone. The ending rather puts one in mind of the ending to the 1980 Flash Gordon movie where we see a red gloved hand emerge from under the rubble and the Emperor Ming retrieve his ring. This is rather a pity as The Master is now way past his sell-by date

The Soul Men makes an enjoyable if undemanding read with some gripping and quite moving movements. Arnold Blumberg keeps the reader turning the page from beginning to end and that is the mark of a good story. Whilst it certainly isn't the best piece of DOCTOR WHO fiction I've ever read, it is far from the worst and was certainly far more enjoyable than the drivell Virgin and BBC books inflicted upon us for years. I thoroughly recommend it. 7/10