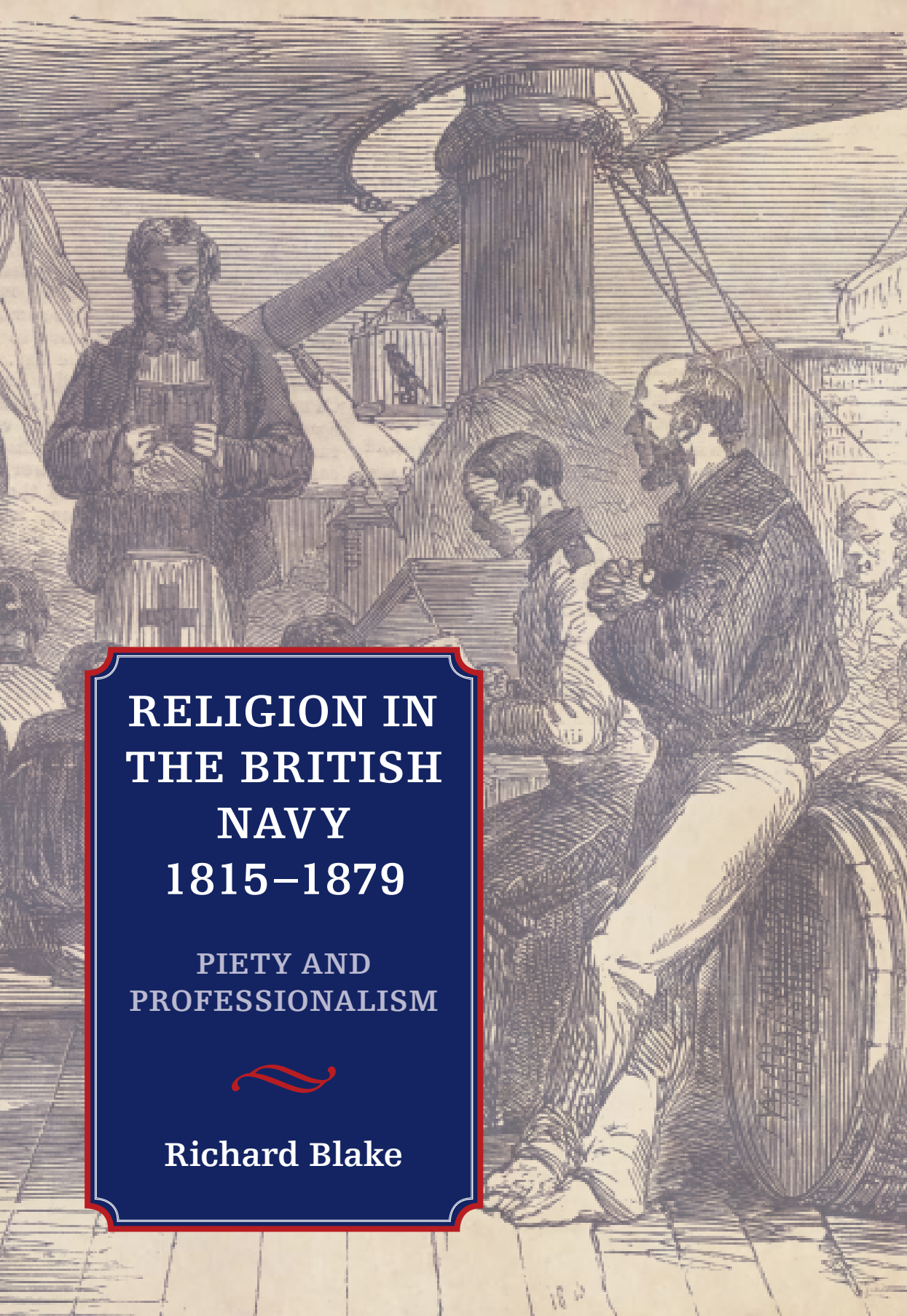

RELIGION IN THE BRITISH NAVY 1815–1879

PIETY AND PROFESSIONALISM

Richard Blake

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THE BOYDELL PRESS

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FOR MARGARET
MY WIFE AND CONSTANT HELPER
WITH LOVE AND DEEP APPRECIATION

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Preface

Godlessness and seafaring often went together in a way of life that sundered family ties and interrupted the rhythm of religious practice. Conventional naval history, while noting that ships' companies had prayers and chaplains afloat and religious institutions ashore, constructs its narrative of manning, training, tactics and operational deployment generally without religion – and misses something significant.

In a bold incursion into new territory this book demonstrates how religion became interwoven with the social history of the navy and examines what it did for professional ethics. It builds on standard ways of measuring religious practice, such as the provision of chaplains and the regularity of divine worship, to reach new assessments of its influence. Gordon Taylor (1978) gave a detailed picture of naval chaplains, their recruitment, conditions of employment and their record of service; Roald Kverndal (1986) analysed the origins of global mission to seafarers in the nineteenth century, and thanks to a subsequent corpus of research we now have a clearer understanding of what was done for their moral and spiritual betterment. We know well enough that prayers were said, sermons preached and tracts given out – but was anyone taking notice? Religious practice could be enforced (to a degree) by regulation, but evangelical hopes always reached beyond this, to the point where individuals were willing to change belief and behaviour – all that the term conversion implies. Did the message meet with some degree of acceptance, with sailors claiming altered convictions and demonstrating new values? If so, how was naval corporate life affected? It is time to move the discourse on from provision to response.

My first book, *Evangelicals in the Royal Navy 1775–1815: Blue Lights and Psalm-Singers* (Boydell Press, 2008), analysed how evangelicalism lodged itself amongst both officers and men in the Napoleonic War, modifying regulations and conditions of service. But would this survive the war's end? The present work examines what went on to be a significant reforming trend. Seamen of the lower deck (as the navy termed its workforce who lacked officer-status) were likely to be labelled 'psalm-singers' if they showed marked piety, whereas similarly inclined officers were either called the same or – perhaps more kindly – 'blue lights'. Since this study focuses on evangelicalism it frequently refers to officers of this persuasion and those heavily influenced by the fervent piety it encouraged: from time to time I use the expression Blue Light to indicate someone using evangelical religious terminology or supporting evangelical activities or keeping company with

evangelicals: contemporaries were not always troubled by the finer points of doctrine.

Whatever sailors may have meant when they bandied nicknames around, evangelicalism actually refers to a corpus of belief and practice. David Bebbington's 'quadrilateral' of biblicism, conversionism, crucicentrism and activism adapts well to a nautical context. With Mark Noll and John Wolffe he has freshly explored its social and religious dynamic, while its place at the interface of imperial and missionary trends has been examined by Andrew Porter and Brian Stanley. The present work has taken advantage of such insights to find new angles on sometimes familiar naval themes.

The enquiry centres on the Royal Navy, the maritime fighting arm of the state, but at least until mid-nineteenth century its personnel were readily interchangeable with men from trading ships. A ministry to one group inevitably touched both.

While it is generally recognised that religious thinking had a part in shaping nineteenth-century attitudes to discipline, health, rank and education, there has been scant acknowledgement of the predominance of evangelicalism in this process – not in numbers but in power to effect change. Once its aims have been identified, together with its mode of operation and depth of resources, the reasons for its influence become clearer, and its controversial but often beneficial contribution to reform can be evaluated.

No book of this length can offer a definitive analysis of all the issues raised but it may suggest fruitful areas for further examination.

Abbreviations

AB, AR, AW	Admiral of the Blue, Red, White
ADC	Aide-de-camp
Adm.	Admiral
AF	Admiral of the Fleet
BCP	*The Book of Common Prayer*
BDE	*Biographical Dictionary of Evangelicals*
BFBS	British and Foreign Bible Society
BL	British Library
BMS	Baptist Missionary Society
Bo'sun	Boatswain
BP	*The Barham Papers*
Capt.	Captain
CB	Companion of the Order of the Bath
CDA	Contagious Diseases Act
Cdr.	Commander
Cdre.	Commodore
C-in-C	Commander-in-Chief
CM	Court martial
CMG	Companion of the Order of St Michael and St George
CMS	Church Missionary Society
CO	Commanding Officer
CPO	Chief Petty Officer
DEB	*Dictionary of Evangelical Biography, 1730–1860*
DNB	*Dictionary of National Biography*
DY	Dockyard
EIC	East India Company (British)
FLA	First Lord of the Admiralty
FRS	Fellow of the Royal Society
FSL	First Sea Lord
GCB	Knight Grand Cross of the Order of the Bath
GCMG	Knight Grand Cross of the Order of St Michael & St George
HMS	Her (or His) Majesty's Ship
HTCOC	*Hudson Taylor and China's Open Century*
KBE	Knight of the Order of the British Empire
KCB	Knight Commander of the Order of the Bath
Lieut. (or Lt.)	Lieutenant

LMS	London Missionary Society
MM	*The Mariner's Mirror*
Mid.	Midshipman
MP	Member of Parliament (House of Commons)
NC	*The Naval Chronicle*
NDA	Naval Discipline Act
NHL	Naval Historical Library, Ministry of Defence
NMBS	Naval and Military Bible Society
NMM	National Maritime Museum, Greenwich
NPU	Naval Prayer Union
NRS	The Navy Records Society
NSM	*The New Sailors' Magazine*
OCU	Officers' Christian Union
ODNB	*Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*
PB	Plymouth Brethren
PO	Petty Officer
POW	Prisoner of war
PP	*Parliamentary Papers*
PRO	Public Records Office (now The National Archives)
QR&AI	*Queen's Regulations and Admiralty Instructions*
RA	Rear-Admiral (sometimes RAB, RAR, RAW – see Admiral)
R&I	*Regulations and Instructions for HM Service at Sea*
RM	Royal Marines
RN	Royal Navy
RNH	Royal Naval Hospital
Rtd.	Retired
RTS	Religious Tract Society
SBS	Sick Berth Steward
SPCK	Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge
SPG	Society for the Propagation of the Gospel
SPRI	Scott Polar Research Institute, Cambridge
TNA	The National Archives, Kew, London
USJ	*The United Service Journal*
USN	United States Navy
VA	Vice-Admiral (sometimes VAB, VAR, VAW – see Admiral)

Introduction: The Barham Bequest

A problem beyond solution?

'Portsmouth Point – wickedness and blasphemy abounds – shocking scene.'[1] Ardent piety in the person of William Wilberforce had just met naval profanity of a fairly normal kind, admittedly excited by return to port after a victory at sea in 1794. To people ashore sailors off their ships seemed wild and licentious, best left to their officers to control with stern discipline when back aboard, but once out at sea the same tempestuous energy made them formidable to the country's enemies. Wilberforce represented evangelicalism of the most confident sort, yet even he was appalled by what he saw of unconverted moral and religious degradation. Other strands of religious opinion were equally at a loss. Stanier Clarke, the suave and learned naval chaplain who was a founder-editor of *The Naval Chronicle*, regarded sailors with their patriotic fervour for God and King as embodiments of true religion, apparently with no need of conversion: 'Christianity in its purest state, utterly devoid of hypocrisy, forms the general and leading feature of a seaman's character.'[2] William Mangin, a clergyman from Bath who tried a chaplaincy in 1812, was convinced that sailors needed conversion, but he soon abandoned the task as he found them incorrigibly secular and irreligious: 'I did not see the smallest likelihood of effecting any material change in the morals of such an assemblage … To convert a man-of-war's crew into Christians would be a task to which the courage of Loyola, the philanthropy of Howard and the eloquence of St Paul united would prove inadequate.'[3] Wilberforce in consternation, Clarke in denial and Mangin in defeat illustrate the problem: sailors seemed far from God and morality, unreached by religion of home and parish, and untroubled by the lack.

Although exacerbated by the interminable wars against French republicanism and Napoleon, the problem had long been recognised. James Ramsay, naval surgeon and clergyman whose pamphlets sparked the anti-slavery movement – never a man to flinch at difficulty – referred to 'the

1 R.I. and S. Wilberforce, *The Life of William Wilberforce*, 5 vols, 1838, ii, p. 58.

2 Sermon for service of thanksgiving after Trafalgar, 5 Dec. 1805, *The Naval Chronicle*, xiv (1805), pp. 487–501.

3 'The Journal of the Rev. William Mangin', H. G. Thursfield (ed.), *Five Naval Journals, 1789–1817*, NRS, 1951, p. 14.

most profligate of mankind, seamen';[4] Admiral Kempenfelt believed that British seamen were more licentious and less religious than those of other nations, while a long-serving officer of marines described a man-of-war as a 'dreadful abode for a Christian'.[5] Yet evangelicalism thrived on this kind of challenge, believing that God would be particularly honoured by the repentance of notorious sinners. For the first time since the days of Queen Anne, piety fired by the Methodist and Evangelical Revival addressed the navy as an entity – its officer corps, the lower deck and the ordinances that regulated its life – and made a distinct appeal for the souls of sailors.

My earlier book, *Evangelicals in the Royal Navy 1775–1815: Blue Lights and Psalm-Singers* (Boydell Press 2008), examined how that movement fared when exposed to sea conditions, prior to and particularly during the wars against Revolutionary and Napoleonic France, 1793–1815. Evangelicals and the new piety acquired first a foothold and then considerable influence, especially when Sir Charles Middleton – 'the evangelical administrator' as he has been called – became first lord of the Admiralty in 1805. Let me attempt a summary for new readers that pays particular attention to his aims, as a convenient prelude to the study that follows.

When this newly awakened piety appeared at sea it began openly enough with Bible distribution and Sunday worship in certain ships, and then developed more secretively into small gatherings in off-duty hours where men would meet to read and pray away from the crowded tumult of the messdecks. It may look as though evangelicals had a strategy but it was a spontaneous one that evolved without anyone to direct it or a controlling organisation to keep it going. How did this come about? Principally it happened because the chief protagonists were men of the sea – prompted, inspired and supported from ashore no doubt – naval officers or chaplains reaching their ships' companies, and men on the messdecks influencing their shipmates on the lower deck, where the customs and routines of the sea service imposed numerous restrictions and provided a few opportunities that were more or less the same for every ship.

As the picture unfolds, however, an underlying aim can be discerned, giving expression and shape to the hopes of the religionists, a goal first articulated by a notable naval administrator. While Wilberforce acknowledged as his driving ambitions the abolition of the slave trade and the reformation of manners, his friend Sir Charles Middleton, admiral, civil

4 Anon. [James Ramsay], *Essay on the Duty and Qualifications of a Sea Officer*, 1765, p. 66.

5 J.K. Laughton (ed.), *Letters and Papers of Charles, Lord Barham, 1758–1813*, 3 vols, NRS, 1907–11, I, p. 308 [*BP* hereafter]; Andrew Burn, *Memoirs of the Life of the late Major General Andrew Burn of the Royal Marines, collected from his Journals*, 2 vols, 1815, I, p. 152 (1772).

servant and cabinet minister, had two similar aims, to forward the abolition movement, and to attempt the moral and spiritual transformation of the navy. It is my contention that he developed a plan for nothing less than the christianisation of the navy – the service that had appalled Wilberforce and Mangin.

Sir Charles Middleton, Lord Barham (1726–1813) – man of vision

For many years he was in no position to turn his ideas into anything concrete, but he mulled them over, pondering far-reaching proposals from his old friend Admiral Kempenfelt, long since tragically drowned, and even drawing up a memorandum of his own.[6] Then quite suddenly and unexpectedly, when aged almost 80, he was summoned to power as first lord of the Admiralty, and he took his opportunity.

For many years he had been quietly working on what he and others had perceived as much needed changes to the massive volume of regulations that gave the navy its ruling principles. First issued in 1731 they had been amended and extended from time to time but in a piecemeal way: Middleton longed to produce a thorough revision but his hopes were shelved when he left office in 1793.[7] When made first lord in 1805, Middleton – now ennobled as Lord Barham – revisited his earlier plans and draft memoranda. Within a few months a comprehensively revised and vastly extended edition of *Regulations and Instructions Relating to His Majesty's Service at Sea* was ready for the Privy Council to endorse and the Admiralty to adopt. Their sweep and power ensured that Middleton's thinking continued to influence the navy from 1806 until they were substantially revised in 1862, and then more fully in 1879.[8] They were in effect Barham's bequest which laid open the navy to religious influence, particularly the kind he valued, with Bibles, preaching and pastoral ministry.

6 Duty of Captains in the Navy, *BP*, ii, pp. 161–5.

7 Ramsay on the need for revision: 'we will suggest the propriety of calling in that heap of contradictory instructions by which the navy is pretended to be governed'; *Essay*, 3rd edn, 1780, 9. 57. Middleton recruited his help in revising Navy Board regulations in 1779: *BP*, i, p. 46.

8 *Regulations and Instructions Relating to His Majesty's Service at Sea*, established by His Majesty in Council, London 1731; *Regulations and Instructions Relating to His Majesty's Service at Sea*, established by His Majesty in Council: given under the hands of the Commissioners for Executing the Office of Lord High Admiral, 25 Jan. 1806, signed Barham, J. Gambier, Philip Patton, Garlies, London 1806; *Queen's Regulations and Admiralty Instructions for the Government of Her Majesty's Naval Service*, London 1862 [signed Somerset, Frederick William Grey, Charles Eden, Charles Frederick, James Robert Drummond, Samuel Whitbread and Clarence Edward Paget]; *Queen's Regulations and Admiralty Instructions*, London 1879.

Historians have assessed Middleton as administrator and Barham as strategist, but little attention has been given to his work as creator and guardian of the navy's ethos. In the professional values of the officer corps his personal convictions were given institutionalised expression, and his ideological influence was arguably as weighty as the administrative reforms (as comptroller of the navy) and strategic grasp (as first lord of the Admiralty) for which he is remembered. His well known evangelicalism is held responsible for the attitudes that shaped public and private life, but those same religious convictions coloured his formulation of the navy's guiding principles. The longevity of his regulations propelled those ideas forward several decades, ensuring they left an imprint on the high Victorian navy.

Barham might wish to christianize the fleet but he well knew the scepticism if not hostility that would greet such an attempt. When his opportunity came, he made radical plans acceptable by presenting them conservatively, in a context of traditionalism, simply by reinvigorating old measures. What after all could be revolutionary about requiring ships to carry chaplains? Samuel Pepys had demanded as much for the navy of the later Stuarts. Similarly with the obligation to honour God by checking profanity and the Lord's Day by holding services: these can be found in the 1662 Articles of War where in fact they echo earlier and ancient provisions.[9] There was nothing disturbing about making captains responsible for the conduct and religious life of their ships' companies: indeed the whole discipline of the navy rested on the all-pervasive authority of commanding officers. True, Instructions for Chaplains had never appeared before, but it hardly seemed a radical matter to specify the duties that earned a salary. Each part seemed innocuous enough. Everything had its antecedent and some were steeped in antiquity. Most commanders of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries presumed those old religious provisions were obsolescent, but Middleton gave them fresh vitality through his *Regulations*. They staked out a place for public religion and they offered an opportunity for revitalised piety to try what it might for the soul of the navy.

He was taking advantage of an unusually favourable climate for change, when thanks to various factors religion was making something of a reappearance at sea. Sir John Jervis linked it with discipline, insisting on Sunday worship aboard the ships of the Mediterranean fleet – even if his motivation had more to do with subservience than salvation. Nelson was in the habit of invoking the aid of the Almighty and attributing success to the blessing of heaven. The challenge to authority in the mutinies of 1797 and the general state of discipline in the Revolutionary War made religion a card worth playing if it would help secure loyalty. During the same period

9 Richard Blake, *Evangelicals in the Royal Navy, 1775–1815: Blue Lights and Psalm-Singers*, Woodbridge, 2008, pp. 10–15 [hereafter Blake].

a few Blue Lights appeared, commanding officers willing to risk their reputation amongst fellow officers by deliberately encouraging not just formal prayers but piety. These religious gains might not have outlasted the struggle against atheistic republicanism had not Middleton and his nephew James Gambier (also on the Admiralty Board) seized their moment in 1806 to reiterate time-honoured customs and requirements which harmonised with wartime attitudes. But there had been a flurry of interest before – surely sincere and sustained – during the War of the Spanish Succession, and the 1731 *Regulations* witnessed to it, but they had lapsed into obsolescence within a generation.[10] Would the Barham measures turn out any differently?

Only time could show whether captains and clergy would turn his aspirations into reality. If respect for God meant no more than a quickly mumbled prayer once in a while at divisions, and perhaps a warning of stern punishment for profanity, the new provisions would do little for personal faith; on the other hand, he had secured an opening not just for liturgy but for the piety and fervour that do not necessarily accompany it – by giving space to preaching, literature and pastoral ministry to the sick and dying. Given the unabashed Anglicanism of the Regulations, much would depend on the spiritual state of the Church of England, along with the chaplains and commissioned officers whose religious life it nourished – and there were encouraging signs of vitality there. A dedicated team of chaplains backed by captains would find a ready field for a gospel ministry, and there was plenty of good that Christian officers might attempt.

In a pamphlet entitled *The Hope of the Navy*, a respected wartime captain and later admiral wrote that everything regulations could do for its spiritual regeneration had been put in place, and all now depended on giving effect to them.[11] But he was wrong. Naval evangelism was altogether more complex than he and Middleton envisaged, and the task could not be achieved solely by chaplains and officers imparting Christian instruction (important though that was) to their own wooden world: the whole maritime sub-culture of seaport life conveyed another message which had to be countered, an undertaking that might loosely be described as putting paid to Portsmouth Point. As an Anglican grandee Barham was not the man to deal with the crimps and prostitutes and tavern keepers who jeopardised his moral and spiritual aims, but there were evangelicals who could do so. Without his vision the navy would have had to wait longer for the touch of revival, but nothing lasting was sustainable afloat without changes ashore.

10 Ibid., pp. 20–1.

11 Rear-Admiral Sir Jahleel Brenton, *The Hope of the Navy, or the true Source of Discipline and Efficiency*, 1839.

Evangelicalism – engine of change

This new religious tendency was essentially evangelical as defined by historian David Bebbington's 'quadrilateral' of biblicism, conversionism, crucicentrism and activism.[12] This is of course a serviceable modern summary of the beliefs that characterised their piety but they were not the terms that contemporaries ever used: they were much more inclined to use denominational descriptors – Anglican, Baptist, Methodist and so on. This study focuses on evangelicalism as a whole and may therefore give an impression of cohesiveness and harmony when the reality was rather different. One of the surprising features uncovered by this enquiry is that people of such different outlook and ecclesiology managed to hammer out a coherent strategy at all.

In truth evangelicalism beyond its core convictions encompassed a wide diversity of beliefs and practice. United as they were over the deity of Christ and the necessity of his death to redeem humanity from sin, they attached differing significance to the involvement of the human will in salvation. While extreme Calvinists taught 'double election' of some to eternal life and others to damnation, a more moderate view – as upheld by the thirty-nine Articles and the Anglican prayer book – emphasised God's sovereign grace in saving sinners; Arminians such as John Wesley, still claiming biblical support and Anglican precedent, stressed individuals' responsibility for their eternal destiny by how they responded to the gospel. All evangelicals (and many other strands of Protestantism) took the Bible as their full and final authority in all matters of belief and conduct, but with varying views over what was symbolic and what literal: in 1824 even the Bible Society split over the issue of biblical inerrancy.[13] And these two matters of scripture and salvation were their foundational beliefs.

When it comes to church practice the range of diversity becomes even wider. There were differing understandings of the ministry, from the bishops, priests and deacons of Anglican orders, through the ministers and pastors of the nonconformist denominations, to the Brethren with only lay elders. All recognised baptism as the entry point to church membership but while

[12] D.W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*, London and New York, 1989, pb 2005, p. 4 [hereafter Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*].

[13] When the BFBS had to decide whether to include the Apocrypha in editions for continental Europe, Robert Haldane (1764–1842), nephew of Adm. Duncan of Camperdown and former Lt RN, evangelist in Switzerland and France, demanded a commitment to biblical inerrancy. Cf. milder approach of Henry Martyn (1781–1812), missionary to India and Persia and pioneer Bible translator: 'the sense from God but the expression from the different writers'; Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, p. 86; Leslie Howsam, *Cheap Bibles*, Cambridge, 1991, pp. 13–14.

Anglicans and Methodists welcomed infants the Baptists and Brethren restricted the rite to those who professed faith on their own account. There were further differences over the manner and frequency of communion, and in understanding of its sacramental significance.

Nor was evangelicalism unchanged by the culture of its day. It readily adopted many insights and emphases of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, and then found new inspirations from the Romantic movement, especially when presented with the intoxicating excitements of Edward Irving's preaching in the 1820s, and a new expectancy of apostolic signs and wonders breaking into the modern age.[14] Much speculation and controversy followed concerning the nature of the Second Advent of Christ, and how the church's mission to the world should be seen in the light of those beliefs: if the day of grace might end abruptly at any moment, then the gospel must be taken with urgency to the ends of the earth without calculation of risk or cost. As the nineteenth century progressed, both church and navy were touched by these developments, and later by the revival associated with D.L. Moody's missions of 1873–5 and the holiness movement.[15]

Denominational history and ecclesiology form the inescapable and far from static background. In order to make the argument clear, evangelicalism is usually treated as an entity, but that can mask its multiplicity of agencies, characters and resources. Some were for officers, others ratings, and a few for both. There were clergy and laity, at sea, in harbour, home and foreign, praying and preaching. Some were handling literature, or providing accommodation, or ministering on the messdecks; others engaged in advocacy and parliamentary lobbying: the churches could marshal formidable resources for the cause of bluejacket evangelism. When this diversity is appreciated, the ability of evangelicalism to come up with a response to practically any presenting problem is more readily explained.

Blue Lights and psalm-singers up to 1815

Newly converted Captain Charles Middleton believed it his Christian duty to provide regular prayers for his ship in the early 1760s; in the American War Admiral Kempenfelt felt that such a practice could and should be extended to the whole navy, and that far from objecting, sailors would soon see advantages with fewer punishments and happier ships' compa-

14 The Rev. Edward Irving (1792–1834), Scottish minister and controversial preacher in London. See Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, p. 80, and pp. 78–94 for wider Romantic influence on evangelicalism.

15 D.L. Moody (1837–99), US evangelist, toured Britain with musician Ira Sankey and preached a revivalist message to huge crowds.

nies.[16] Such a revival of religious practice appeared increasingly attractive in the 1790s to a wider spread of naval opinion. During the war against atheistic Republican France, admirals Jervis, Nelson and Saumarez (to take three notable examples) all saw value in demonstrating Britain's Protestant Christian credentials. Sunday prayers were held; Bibles were circulated, tracts distributed and a more energetic group of chaplains appeared at sea. Developing slightly later and for rather different reasons, pockets of piety established themselves on the lower deck. These two streams of religion – the one officer-led, the other spontaneously generated in seamen's messes – were more inclined to merge when war resumed after the Amiens truce. Off-duty gatherings of derided 'psalm-singers' might be found in many ships, sometimes led by an officer or chaplain, a trusted petty officer or occasionally a seaman or marine, meeting for prayer and Bible reading. By the war's end there were known to be eighty such groups where officers and men shared devotions together.[17]

This in brief is the ground covered in my earlier book. This new one takes the same movement on for the next few decades until about 1880. It examines how the values and general outlook of a small minority – neither prominent in numbers nor high in esteem in the Napoleonic Wars and for years afterwards – came to be a formative element and arguably one of the most dominant ones in the evolving ethos of the Victorian navy. Throughout this hundred-year story the different emphases of officer corps and lower deck remain as a significant discontinuity. Evangelical officers were almost to a man Anglican – like practically all their colleagues of commissioned rank – and this determined the pattern of their outreach. They supported the prayer book liturgy and the ordained ministry of the Church of England and sought to breathe new life into those forms through gospel preaching and the circulation of Bibles or tracts. From Middleton at the Admiralty down through the officer ranks they aimed to present the Christian message to the lower deck through officer-led and clergy-instructed ministry – a 'top-down' approach in today's expression.

On the lower deck there were individuals seeking to spread their faith as well – or at least to keep it alive – and they were drawn to a very different mode of operation: they relied on a supportive group of colleagues to meet for prayer and Bible reading in some secluded part of the ship in their hours off watch. This kind of need was not satisfied by formal Sunday services with prayers for the whole ship's company led by captain or chaplain. The unofficial dog-watch gatherings of derided 'psalm-singers' were more like the groups of Methodists known as classes which Wesley had initiated. Whenever such a prayer group was seen by fellow-sailors its members were

16 *BP*, ii, p. 163 (Middleton in 1757); i, p. 309 (Kempenfelt 1779).
17 Blake, *Evangelicals*, p. 228, n. 4.

likely to be labelled 'Methodist' whether they were technically Wesleyans or not, and when they wanted a letter of pastoral encouragement they normally received it from a Methodist minister or the pastor of a dissenting congregation. Lower-deck piety generally took nonconformist forms while fervent officers were Anglican.

The exceptions prove the rule. When Lieutenant Richard Marks provided music and reading classes, Bible studies and prayer gatherings for the *Conqueror*'s seamen he was using a format closer to Methodism than Anglicanism, and the shoreside evangelists of the 1820s who blazed a trail for later Scripture Readers and lay missioners came from societies begun by Baptists and Methodists. Arguably the Church of England was at its most successful when it adopted nonconformist models. The two most prominent Anglican protagonists, Marks the publicist and Gambier the patron, stretched their disregard for denominations to controversial levels.[18]

What made the Evangelical wing of the Church of England so aware of its Anglican character and so wary of being mistaken for dissent? One important factor was its overt monarchism. The Christ-centred biblical piety of the eighteenth-century revival had many points of congruence with Puritan fervour, but shorn of the political concept of a godly commonwealth beloved of the republican sectaries. If the new piety was to find any favour at all amongst the armed forces of the crown it must emphatically disown any link to these dangerous antecedents. Blue Light captains who allowed lower-deck prayer gatherings knew the risks and were keen to have these groups led by a chaplain or lieutenant, or at least a respected and reliable figure with some authority – the master or sail-maker perhaps.[19] With such considerations in mind Barham restated the traditional and uncompromising Anglicanism in the religious provisions of the *Regulations*, but the nineteenth century came to need other insights and freer methods before the navy could be thoroughly exposed to Christian influences and lose its mistrust of fervour.

That kind of piety might have died out in 1815 as the wartime crews paid off, but it did not. There is some evidence that evangelicals faced official disdain if not hostility in the first decade of peace: where brief details of service careers appear they give a sense of how prominent, experienced and accomplished these men were in their profession – relevant to the questions of whether beliefs hindered preferment and of how their type of religion

18 Rev. J.B. Marsden, *Two Sermons on the Life, Ministry and Death of the late Rev. Richard Marks*, 1847, refers to his catholic spirit of fellowship with non-Anglicans as maybe excessive. Gambier defended the Baptist Bo'sun Smith, noting that he was 'no dissenter from the cause of Christ'.

19 Blake, *Evangelicals*, p. 238. Bogus piety could be a cloak for crime; Sir John Ross, *Memoirs and Correspondence of Lord de Saumarez*, 2 vols, 1838, ii, p. 93.

spread its influence. It may fairly be claimed that by the later Victorian period naval evangelicalism had moved from derision to regard and maybe even to cultural dominance. This study sets out evidence for such a claim and explores the reasons.

Although the Royal Navy takes centre stage, the perspective keeps sight of the broad maritime culture and of the religious world ashore who took such interest in it. Throughout the focus is on evangelicalism. Of course there were men and women of conspicuous piety who did not subscribe to these beliefs *in toto*, or side with them as a party. A full-orbed presentation that does justice to every strand of churchmanship would be way beyond the compass of this book, and when other ecclesiastical traditions appear they are usually seen in relation to evangelicalism rather than in their own right. And a further disclaimer is required here. Chaplains were theologians (or ought to have been) whereas naval officers and men were not, and did not always define their views in strictly theological categories. I have felt justified in treating as evangelicals those who show clear aspects of this kind of piety; indeed, I have used the terms evangelicalism or the new piety virtually interchangeably. Although the work aims at precision wherever possible, I have sought to be generously inclusive. As a result it is more than likely I have placed amongst the Blue Lights some who will be identified by further research as individuals of broader churchmanship. Part of the fascination of this study is to note how the values and attitudes that first identified a very small and marginalised group eventually shaped the ethos of the whole profession – until many who were not truly evangelicals came to look and behave like them. This book traces how those convictions moved from periphery to mainstream.

General shape of the argument

In 1815 the prospects for evangelicalism afloat looked bleak. Its activism had become an irritant to those who felt that moral reclamation was no part of the navy's duty and its unabashed fervour was an embarrassment to churchmen of a more staid and orthodox tradition. Senior figures in the Admiralty and amongst the chaplains regarded its enthusiasm with wintry disdain, although they could certainly see a place for religion of a strictly Anglican and prayer book kind. Unofficial lower-deck gatherings disappeared and tract distribution was restricted, as clerical orthodoxy made its bid to displace lay-inspired fervour. It was too late to put the genie back in the bottle, however. Having discovered the maritime world, the evangelical churches continued to spread their message to seamen, and since it was common for merchant sailors to enlist in the navy from time to time it was inevitable that some men of piety would be found on the lower deck.

While evangelicals might struggle to recover the influence they had once enjoyed in the Admiralty and the higher echelons of power, they managed to bypass obstructions within the navy by developing alternative portside strategies. With an army of half-pay officers to keep landward congregations and the seafaring world in touch with each other, the new measures proved well judged and effective.

Some repositioning took place in the 1820s, 1830s and 1840s. Evangelical activists contributed sometimes stridently to professional debate about discipline, morality and humanitarian reform. Meanwhile young officers of fervent piety were gaining recognition in mid-ranking appointments and conspicuous areas of service – on survey and exploration, and on operations directed against the slave trade: these were men who would reach commanding positions and distinction in the 1850s. Amongst the chaplains a new spirit of vigour and enterprise awoke as the traditionalists passed from the scene. Gradually the evangelicalism that had once appeared to its critics as censorious and restrictive began to be associated with a more benevolent spirit that won friends on the lower deck, while innovative schemes of lay evangelism brought the Christian message into hospital wards, naval barracks and onto ships' messdecks.

This book explores how the internal life of the navy was affected by the agitation of evangelicals. They welcomed measures to curb alcohol-abuse and they led the opposition to shipboard sexual licence during off-duty hours in harbour, when prostitutes were admitted in large numbers. The publication of statistical health data exposed the cost of such behaviour in terms of sexually transmitted diseases and a measurable loss of working days to the crown: it no longer seemed such a bad idea to explore religious ways of curbing excess. Conspicuous individuals with such convictions – household names like Parry and Franklin and rising stars such as Sulivan and Peel – demonstrated the feasibility of combining piety with high professionalism.

And while the officer corps was beginning to show an increased openness to evangelical ideas, the lower deck experienced a differently packaged appeal, with religious teaching allied to welfare provision culminating in the work of Agnes Weston's Sailors' Rests. When an evangelical became head of the chaplains' department increased attention was paid to Confirmation courses and frequent Communions, while places for private prayer aboard ship were officially sanctioned. Lay scripture readers and uniformed missioners were allowed access to messdecks and barracks, exposing off-duty sailors (if they were willing) to further informal Bible-based ministrations from men of the same social background.

Around the time of the Russian War, daily prayer became frequent and chaplains were fully engaged with naval operations afloat or ashore, while aboard the new training ships religious observance was made routine. In the mid-century decades, with campaigns in the Baltic, Crimea, India and

China, widespread interest developed in naval and military matters amongst the nation at large. The churches were ready to send their people into the forces as chaplains and recruits, and to finance evangelistic ventures. Parliament was vexed to discover how moral laxity came with a price tag, and the naval authorities began to appreciate as never before the good that religion might do for welfare, morale and discipline. As the navy sorted out its manning problems by introducing training ships and a manpower reserve, it looked to religious influence for moral education.

At this stage evangelicalism was particularly strong in society ashore, and when the navy wanted a religious viewpoint they were likely to encounter this one. During the 1860s and 1870s evangelical influence reached its zenith in the navy, as the Admiralty lost its dread of unofficial piety and lay-led gatherings, and welcomed the welfare provision that accompanied low church evangelism. Eventually High Church Tractarianism would become more dominant amongst the chaplains, and a growing secularism would make an alternative bid for lower-deck loyalties, but the high tide of evangelical influence lasted many years, and arguably left a mark that remained evident long into the succeeding century.

This new study opens with a survey of evangelicalism in the navy of 1815 and its prospects for survival; it examines how the principal thrust of post-war maritime evangelisation was amongst merchant seamen – and explains its relevance to the navy. The central section deals with mid-century trends, including moral and medical issues, the revitalised influence of chaplains and lay piety. Three more chapters consider how evangelicalism impacted on missionary expansion, exploration and the maritime policing of a global empire.

Evidence is presented to show that, alongside less demanding religious beliefs, fervent faith was becoming more acceptable. It was no bar to the pursuit of science, especially if understanding of the natural world shed light on its Creator. Meanwhile the navy's collective understanding of its global duty reflected some of these Christian values – shown most obviously in the campaign against slavery and in support for missionaries, in Arctic exploration and (more ambiguously) in the opening of China. Fervent piety helped sustain a spirit of humanity and altruism that coexisted with perceptions of national interest. Once marginalised and derided, evangelicalism came to modify and refine the ethos of the high Victorian navy. This book shows how and why.

Some editorial conventions

1. The term Evangelical – with a capital initial letter – normally refers to the low church party within the Church of England who upheld the fourfold convictions that Bebbington defines; evangelical (lower case) describes their non-Anglican equivalent, and both groups together.
2. For the Rev. George Charles Smith of Penzance I use the distinctive but inaccurate designation that contemporaries favoured – Bo'sun Smith.
3. Where warship names are followed by a number in brackets this indicates the number of guns carried and conveys an idea of size.

PART I

SURVIVING AND SPREADING

1

The First Decades of Peace

In the immediate aftermath of the war evangelical piety was more prominent in the merchant marine than in the Royal Navy. Nonetheless with so many points of contact between the two it was inevitable that what influenced sailors in trade would eventually affect the navy as well.

Merchant seamen and the Thames Revival

With the coming of peace the navy rapidly shrank in size. As large numbers of ships were paid off many thousands of officers and men effectively left the navy. Half-pay officers were assured of an income: some returned to the sea, perhaps in the merchant service, but many never did. For the most part seamen from the lower deck continued to earn their living by seafaring, often in trade but sometimes choosing to enlist once again in a man-of-war. Those wartime prayer groups scattered and disappeared: in a voluntary navy on a peacetime footing there was less fear of desertion or sedition, more opportunity to enjoy shore leave and less need for religion to sustain morale. What happened then to all that fervour?

Part of it burst out amongst merchant crews on the Thames, creating fresh interest in religion and expressions of shipboard piety. From this beginning sailors spread the custom of prayers and Bible reading in what became known as the Bethel movement. Within a few years it had acquired a distinctive character, largely due to the vision of one man, the Rev. George Charles Smith of Penzance, better known as Bo'sun Smith (1782–1863), and it gained extraordinary momentum as a result of his energies.[1] What began as a small-scale impulse towards evangelism aboard merchant vessels developed first into what missiologists have called the Thames Revival, and then into a movement to reform the character and environment of seafarers – with repercussions in both mercantile marine and Royal Navy.

[1] The Rev. George Charles Smith (1782–1863), sailor, Baptist minister, reformer, known as Bo'sun Smith; impressed into RN 1796, in battles Camperdown (1797) and Copenhagen (1801), discharged 1802; converted, into ministry (1807), pastor of Octogan Chapel, Penzance; evangelist in London dockland. See Roald Kverndal, *Seamen's Missions: Their Origin and Early Growth*, Pasadena, 1986, and *George Charles Smith of Penzance*, Pasadena, 2012; Theophilus Ahijah Smith, *Prospectus: The Great Moral Reformation of Sailors*, London, 1874, precursor for a full biography of his father which never appeared.