

EVANGELICALS IN THE ROYAL NAVY 1775-1815

Richard Blake



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Contents

List of illustrations vi

Preface vii

Abbreviations viii

Introduction i

- i A Century of Neglect and a Call to Revival 5
- ii The Genesis of a Movement: Middleton, Kempenfelt and Ramsay 35
- iii Gathering Momentum: Divine Service at Sea in the Later Eighteenth Century 69
- iv The Blue Lights during the French Revolutionary War, 1793–1802: A Change of Emphasis 105
- v Developing the Ethos of the Officer Corps 140
- vi The Impact of Evangelical Enthusiasm on Fighting Determination: Quarter-Deck or Organ Loft 174
- vii Evangelical Activity on the Lower Deck: The Psalm-Singers 225
- viii Evangelicalism at the End of the Napoleonic War: A Flare in the Darkness? 268

Bibliography 294

Index 309

Illustrations

- 1 Admiral Charles Middleton. Oil painting, British School, 19th century (detail) 37
- 2 Rear-Admiral Richard Kempenfelt. Oil painting by Tilly Kettle 51
- 3 The Reverend James Ramsay. Oil painting by Carl Frederik von Breda 59
- 4 Lord George Graham in his cabin celebrating the capture of privateers, c. 1745. Oil painting by William Hogarth 78
- 5 Title-page of *The Seaman's Monitor* by Josiah Woodward, 1705 edition 97
- 6 HMS *Defence* at the Battle of the Glorious First of June, 1794. Oil painting by Nicholas Pocock 121
- 7 Admiral Adam Duncan, 1st Viscount Duncan. Oil painting by Henry Pierre Danloux 135
- 8 'Britons! Your Nelson is dead!' Poster of 1806 152
- 9 Vice-Admiral Sir Charles Vinicombe Penrose. Oil painting by W. Sharp 164
- 10 Vice-Admiral Sir James Saumarez. Oil painting by Edwin Williams 176
- 11 'Sternhold and Hopkins at Sea or a Stave out of Tune', 1809. Satirical etching by C. Williams 191
- 12 James, Lord Gambier. Oil painting by Sir William Beechey 197
- 13 Sketch map of the Aix Roads action 1809 216
- 14 Bible-reading on board a British frigate, c. 1830. Oil painting by Augustus Earle 270–1

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Preface

THIS work has been a long time on the slipway. In some ways the keel was laid unwittingly in my childhood by a Guernsey sea captain who gave my father a fine engraving of Admiral Lord de Saumarez and a copy of Ross's two-volume biography. I passed that portrait every time I went up or down stairs. In time I turned to the books and noticed that the admiral had professed just the same kind of evangelical faith that my parents held. My father was a master mariner who had served with the navy in both world wars. Amongst his close Christian friends were the Guernseyman – former Commodore of the British India Steam Navigation Company – and a senior master in the Union Castle line. The connection between faith and seafaring seemed something to explore, and accordingly I undertook part-time research into aspects of this at Southampton University under the skilled and generous supervision of the late Professor John Bromley. When at last I retired from a career in teaching I found time to develop my earlier work and to prepare it for publication.

Over forty years I have valued the help and encouragement of many people. I am grateful to the governors of Monkton Combe School for allowing me a term's leave of absence to start my research, and of Luckley Oakfield School for granting me a sabbatical term in 1999 to begin more focused writing. The staff of the National Maritime Museum, the National Archive at Kew, the British Library, the Naval Historical Library, Southampton University Library, the SPCK and the Scripture Gift Mission made my researches a pleasure. Professor N. A. M. Rodger, who knows so much about every aspect of naval history, and Surgeon Vice-Admiral Sir James Watt who understands the correlation between Christian faith, medicine and the navy better than any living authority, have both encouraged this study and helped with their advice and expertise. Dr Roald Kverndal with his unrivalled knowledge of seafarers' missions both British and global has been a particular inspiration.

The present Lord de Saumarez has kindly given permission to publish extracts from the private papers of Admiral Sir James Saumarez. I am grateful to Peter Sowden for all the encouragement, advice and practical help he has given me in preparing the book for publication.

Without the understanding and support of my wife Margaret and our family the work could never have been finished. On and off this study has accompanied all the years of our marriage, and throughout she has given a warm welcome to the seafarers of ages past who have intruded into our home and absorbed great tracts of my time. I gladly pay her this affectionate tribute of thanks.

Abbreviations

Adm.	Admiral
<i>BDEB</i>	<i>Blackwell Dictionary of Evangelical Biography</i>
BL	British Library
<i>BP</i>	The Barham Papers, edited for the Navy Records Society
Capt.	Captain
CB	Companion of the Order of the Bath
Cdr.	Commander
Cdre	Commodore
C-in-C	Commander-in-Chief
CMS	Church Missionary Society
<i>DNB</i>	<i>Dictionary of National Biography</i>
GCB	Knight Grand Cross of the Order of the Bath
KB	Knight of the Order of the Bath
KCB	Knight Commander of the Order of the Bath
Lieut.	Lieutenant
<i>MM</i>	<i>The Mariner's Mirror</i>
MS	The Marine Society
<i>NC</i>	<i>The Naval Chronicle</i>
NHL	Naval Historical Library
NMBS	Naval and Military Bible Society
<i>NMBS</i>	<i>Anniversary Report of the Naval and Military Bible Society</i>
NMM	National Maritime Museum
NRS	Navy Records Society
<i>NSM</i>	<i>The New Sailor's Magazine</i>
<i>ODNB</i>	<i>Oxford Dictionary of National Biography</i>
PRO	Public Record Office
<i>RAI</i>	<i>Regulations and Instructions Relating to His Majesty's Service at Sea</i>
RN	Royal Navy
RM	Royal Marines
RTS	Religious Tract Society
RUSI	Royal United Services Institute
SPCK	Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge
SPG	Society for Propagating the Gospel
<i>USJ</i>	<i>The United Service Journal</i>

Introduction

HISTORIANS have always known that Evangelicalism got into the navy because it is linked with one of the most dramatic – and notorious – episodes of the Napoleonic Wars. In 1809 a British fleet had the French at their mercy in Aix Roads and might have destroyed the entire battle squadron as it lay stranded and keeling over in shoal water – had the Evangelical commander-in-chief, Lord Gambier, shown as much concern for winning the war as for spreading his religion. That was the opinion expressed fiercely and publicly by Lord Cochrane, the young captain of genius who had personally created the opportunity for victory. The echoes of that argument have reverberated to the present, with Gambier invariably seen as an eccentric who might have made a bishop but was incompetent as a fighting admiral.

The navy never seemed the right place for evangelical fervour – religion maybe, but not zealotry – and during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars officers with these opinions were commonly seen as misfits, with enough collective identity to earn the pejorative ‘Blue Lights’. Gambier, the best known of them, by missing his call to greatness at Aix Roads showed that he was unsuited for command, while his family link with the able but unpopular Sir Charles Middleton (later Lord Barham, First Lord in 1805–6) invites the conclusion that eminence came through nepotism not ability. Religion of this kind – so the line runs – should have stayed in pulpits ashore: afloat it was risibly irrelevant and damaging.

And yet there is something astray with this evaluation. For a start, it underestimates the strength of religious practice in the navy. While Jervis was more of a martinet than a pastor he was scarcely less zealous than Gambier in holding church services at sea even in the presence of the enemy. Nelson’s Christianity was not Gambier’s, but it fed an essential part of his persona. Neither Jervis nor Nelson were Blue Lights, but Nelson was just as ready as they to invoke the aid of the Almighty and to attribute victory to his intervention. All three of the British flag officers at Trafalgar were supporters of the Bible societies and distributed religious literature to their crews – just as Gambier is so slated for doing.

Then again, the movement cannot be understood by referring only to Middleton and Gambier, for there was a strong supporting cast. Their contribution to the navy was a great deal wider and more subtle than the moralising proselytism for which they are known. A reappraisal is needed. For one thing, some were outstanding combat commanders – Duncan, Saumarez, Pellew – and for another, taken as a group they generated humane reforms and far-sighted analyses of what

the navy needed, as seen in Kempenfelt's letters, Penrose's ideas in *The Naval Chronicle*, Pellew's prototype punishment returns, and Barham's *Regulations*. Their thinking on social issues proved seminal.

Most of the material used here is familiar enough. Other historians have noticed – for example – that the SPCK was supplying ships with Bibles and prayer books, that Duncan was a profoundly God-fearing man, and that Bo'sun Smith became the most conspicuous agitator for sailors' moral reformation in the post-war period. Where this study breaks new ground is by relating disparate elements to one another and to the familiar evangelical revival, so that its coherence as well as its development can be seen. The starting date is 1775 when the War of American Independence broke out, and it ends when the wartime fleets were paid off in 1815. My basic argument is that the Blue Lights initially tried to restore religion to its traditional prominence, and then came to recognise that the navy was a huge unevangelised mission field. Responding to this challenge during the Napoleonic War, they worked to spread the Christian message through voluntary prayer groups in scores of ships. The Blue Light programme aimed for more than individual salvation: it nurtured a compassionate awareness of lower deck needs which in turn developed into workable schemes of humanitarian reform.

Fortunately for the Blue Lights, some of their concerns were shared by admirals and captains who made no claim to piety. For reasons more to do with discipline than the Kingdom of God, Sir John Jervis insisted on regular religious observance. The expanded demand for manpower had brought into the navy elements which could not readily be tamed by well-proven methods, and commanders were willing to try what religion could do. Naval Regulations specified copious applications of compulsory worship but the prescription had been neglected for decades. While the Evangelicals were recalling the officer corps to its religious and pastoral obligations, the outbreak of the 1797 mutinies underlined the wisdom of trying gentler forms of social control. Blue Lights steadily gained attention, not for their eccentricity, but for the compelling evidence of their success in running ships' companies under captains such as Brenton, Penrose or Hillyar.

Independently of this process, wartime lower-deck seamen with Methodist-type convictions were forming their own gatherings, derisively termed 'psalm-singers'. The two movements became aware of each other during the Napoleonic Wars – officers and men sharing a common faith, and meeting for prayer and Bible study in voluntary off-duty gatherings. In ships without Blue Lights they appear to have struggled, but where officers (and especially captains) encouraged piety, they had significant influence. Eventually no less than eighty ships of the fleet supported praying groups of this kind. In parallel to what was happening afloat, a striking work developed amongst prisoners in France.

At each stage evangelicals came up with the tools needed. For church services afloat, there were prayer books and Bibles; when the focus moved to evangelism, they gave tracts and New Testaments for personal use. The cell groups were a revolutionary device working voluntarily in off-duty hours, often bringing together officers and men. And once peace came – beyond the scope of this book – they devised the recognised apparatus of missions to seamen, with floating chapels, mariners' churches, sailors' hostels, leisure facilities, and welfare measures for dependants.

The focus of this book is evangelicalism. It is not a comprehensive study of religion in the navy. There were many Scots whose Presbyterianism was given no special treatment, and there was a strong body of Catholics, principally from Ireland, whose religious needs were callously disregarded. My neglect of other creeds and traditions results from constraints of space and perspective, and does not imply that they were too few or unimportant to deserve notice. This study might also have been enriched by exploring more thoroughly the religious climate of the eighteenth century, but again I must plead the limits of space. Furthermore, as shall become apparent, the quality of naval religion depended relatively little on the vigour of the Hanoverian clergy ashore. The recruitment of chaplains and their freedom to exercise any kind of ministry aboard ship were in the hands of ships' captains: until commanding officers saw much point in religion there was little that a clergyman could do. A major part of this book concerns the process whereby senior officers began to see value in religious observance.

To go beyond 1815 in a single volume would have resulted in an unwieldy study, and yet it cannot really be left there. How did the movement continue in its mission to sailors, and how durable was its influence in the navy? After the war the Blue Lights and their allies turned to social and evangelistic action to reform maritime society. Since the lower deck was manned from the national pool of seamen, this programme did not leave the navy unaffected. Furthermore, evangelicalism had not yet done with the navy. While it lacked the prominence it had enjoyed under Barham, its influence was still felt through *Regulations*, through agitation over particular questions (notably punishment and prostitution), and through the quiet example of a new generation of young officers.

From 1775 to 1815 the Blue Lights consistently promoted religion and morality, so that the navy would be strengthened. In the process they found ways to elevate the self-respect of the lower deck. As the next half-century would show, they imparted an ethical tone to the officer corps, and they managed to give to the whole service something of their own moral purpose. From a high Victorian vantage point, those early Blue Lights begin to look remarkably far-sighted.

This treatment complements Gordon Taylor, *The Sea Chaplains* (Oxford, 1978), and Roald Kverndal, *Seamen's Missions: Their Origin and Early Growth* (Pasadena, 1986). While Taylor gave a valuable study of the chaplains, he made no detailed assessment of the spiritual value of sea-going clergy, and left out much concerning lay religion. As my study seeks to show, the clergy could not be the sole or even the principal force for evangelism, if only because of their shortage of numbers. Kverndal's monumental work takes note of wartime naval developments but is properly focused on maritime mission, largely amongst merchant seamen and principally after the Napoleonic War. I believe we need a study of evangelical mission in the Royal Navy – and here it is.

A note on three stylistic conventions

1. Evangelical and evangelical. Spelt with a capital it denotes the Church of England party that emphasised Bible preaching and conversion – associated with Whitefield, Wilberforce, Newton, and Simeon. When it appears lower case, 'evangelical' refers to the same doctrines in a non-denominational or a free church sense. Followers of the new piety were all *evangelical* but only Anglicans were *Evangelical*.
2. The Reverend George Charles Smith (1786–1863), a Baptist minister, once served in the navy as a boatswain's mate. He became famous under the incorrect title of Bo'sun Smith. It is how contemporaries knew him, and I often refer to him thus.
3. Where warships are given a figure in parentheses after the name it is an indication of the armament and size. For example, the *Defence* (74) carried 74 guns and was a third rate line of battle ship.

A Century of Neglect and a Call to Revival

Prelude

THE American War was not going well in late 1779. The quarrel with the Colonies had brought both France and Spain into hostilities with Britain, and there was danger of invasion as well as a threat to her worldwide possessions. The Channel Fleet's chief of staff in the *Victory* had pressing concerns over the conduct of the war, which he often expressed in private letters to his friend the Comptroller of the Navy, Sir Charles Middleton, who carried heavy burdens of his own for the proper equipping of Britain's fleets. In December, taking advantage of the winter period when a first-rate flagship would not be at sea, Richard Kempenfelt wrote again, and this time he included some remarks about collective worship.

Divine service should ... be performed every Sunday; and I think a short form of prayer for mornings and evenings, to be used every day, would be proper ... The French and Spaniards, in their ships, have their matins and vespers every day. Our seamen people are more licentious than those of other nations. The reason is, they have less religion. Don't let anyone imagine that this discipline will disgust the men, and give them a dislike to the service, for the very reverse will be the consequence.¹

This may be seen as the foundation document of a reform movement aiming to bring Christianity into mainstream naval life in the late eighteenth century. In time Kempenfelt, Middleton and officers who thought as they did would be called Blue Lights or 'Methodists' and psalm-singers.

Amidst their wartime responsibilities these two senior officers were prepared to give mental space to something so apparently marginal as sailors' morals and religion, but to Kempenfelt and Middleton these were far from being secondary matters; they were at the heart of their personal values, and in their judgement ought to be at the core of naval life. Although staunch in their Protestantism they found inspiration from contemporary Catholic practice, where religious observance at sea remained strong. The French and Spanish ships of the 1770s were following the common practice of all European mariners in the early sixteenth

¹ J. K. Laughton (ed.), *The Letters and Papers of Charles, Lord Barham, 1758–1813* [hereafter *BP*], 3 vols., NRS (1907–11), I, p. 308.

century, but why had such observances died out in British ships? Where Catholic practice had withered away in a Protestant climate, what spirituality had taken its place? Was Kempenfelt justified in his assumptions that orthodox practice was essential not just for morality but for discipline as well, and would British sailors really welcome more religion?

This chapter will give context for Kempenfelt's remarks by exploring links between seafaring and religion, and then more specifically considering how Protestant England lost the hold that the Pre-Reformation Church had exercised over maritime culture.

The Sea-Going Environment

IN every age the sea has been cruel and unforgiving. It has not lost its force today, even when technology has taken much of the unpredictability out of storm and current, and when position-fixing by satellite signal has become an exact science. For the centuries when wind and muscle were the only source of power at sea the dangers were immeasurably multiplied. Pilotage required close observation of tide and shore, while oceanic navigation depended on sightings of sun and stars, together with the technical knowledge to turn sightings into measurement and measurement into position lines on a chart. Seafaring was notoriously perilous and mariners of all kinds, whether coastal or deep-sea, faced dangers that emptied voyaging of romanticism. People who earned their living this way became hardy and self-reliant, inured both to hardship and shoreward refinements.

Ocean-going sailors seemed to others like a race apart, a breed of men whose habits, dress, appearance and language were distinctive. Seafaring left a man on the outskirts of the community ashore, ill at ease amongst land folks. It was a way of life that took him to the far reaches of the globe but kept him isolated from most of his fellow countrymen. To work aloft amongst a world of rope and canvas in constant movement demanded confident agility which came more naturally to youngsters. Most sailors went to sea when quite young – eleven years old was not uncommon – and their education suffered. They learned their skills at an age when other children were in school, but then few seamen valued book learning as highly as practical competence. They acquired the arcane vocabulary of the sea in a community of men, with little feminine influence. Sea-going broke the ties of upbringing, along with habits of church going. Family life had little opportunity to flourish during intervals ashore, and sailors were notorious for their casual sexual liaisons. It could hardly be otherwise amongst hardy young men with strong instincts which had to be restrained for months at sea. Once ashore, their taste for liquor and women maintained a dark trade in all the world's ports – ancient and modern – condoned or even encouraged as palliatives for the rigours of life at sea.

To natural dangers were added the risks of disease. Fresh produce would last for brief voyages only, and deep water seafarers had to get used to a diet of salt meat and ship's biscuit, inevitably lacking in vitamin C. In the eighteenth century a better understanding of how to combat scurvy began to save lives, but not before huge numbers had fallen victim. Foreign voyages brought close encounters with malaria, or fevers and fluxes inadequately understood, and venereal diseases whose origins were no mystery at all.

Life already at risk was constrained further by the customs of shipboard routine. Stern discipline was recognised as essential for the preservation of ship and cargo. Sailors must work aloft in all weathers whatever the risk to individual safety. When candles were the only form of artificial light the danger of fire was ever-present, and strict guard against carelessness was essential. With numbers of men cooped up in crowded proximity, rules had to be enforced about cleanliness of person and deck area. Quarrels could easily arise, and regulations against fighting, gambling and abusive language were common. Disorder might jeopardise the ship and her company. Strong discipline was in fact perceived as essential, and generally was not resented by seamen so long as it conformed to the accepted customs of the sea.

Sanctions there had to be, and in every sailing fleet they included corporal punishment, a common means of enforcing laws ashore. There is no need to suppose that sea-going bred a peculiar type of cruelty. Flogging was widely used, but what after all were the alternatives? To put a man in confinement meant his duties had to be done by his shipmates. To deprive a sailor of food or leisure would hardly distinguish the guilty from the innocent, and to fine him when pay was a distant prospect and there was nothing to spend his money on at sea would have seemed no punishment at all. Baffling and deplorable as it may be to modern taste, sailors commonly accepted beating as a necessary evil, but they were perfectly capable of seeing the difference between reasonable force and tyranny.

In their harsh life, sailors commonly made space for a rudimentary kind of spirituality. They might know little of orthodox piety but they commonly retained some sense of religion. How could it be otherwise? In ways more dramatically dangerous than landsmen, they felt themselves at the mercy of the elements and instinctively grasped at anything offering hope of security. Evidence for this kind of natural religion is not hard to find from ancient times to the present. It may not be profound or theological, and often it is scarcely distinguishable from superstition.

Marcus Rediker and Peter Earle have researched the life and beliefs of seamen generally in the eighteenth century, focusing primarily on merchant sailors. Rediker found 'an amalgam of religion and irreligion, magic and materialism,

superstition and self-help' overlaying a substratum of scepticism and anti-clericalism that was not uncommon amongst the uneducated. He attributes their well-founded reputation for irreligion to their isolation from family life and shore-based religious observance; work at sea obliterated the rhythms of the church calendar, both Sundays and religious festivals. Sailors belonged to the enclosed world of a ship at the mercy of the elements: they were, he says, 'always perched on the curling lip of disaster'. The only way to combat danger was through exertion and co-operation. 'Self-help and solidarity, so utterly essential to survival, eclipsed religion in cultural importance and value. Irreligion became a basis for community.'²

It is a compelling view, substantiated by contemporary opinion that seafarers were amongst the most abandoned and profane of men. But it must not pass without qualification. Many sailors were troubled by defiance of God, by blasphemers who invoked divine judgement upon ship and crew, and they retained a moral code, rudimentary and easy-going perhaps, but essential to preserve the harmony of a close-packed community. Earle came across plenty of evidence that sailors possessed Bibles and devotional books, that masters recognised Sunday with lighter duties if not with devotions, and that prayers were occasionally held in a good many ships. 'Scattered evidence suggests that religious observance was not unusual on merchant ships, though regular prayers may well have been commoner in the seventeenth than in the eighteenth century. Much no doubt rested on the piety or otherwise of the captain' – assisted perhaps by a clergyman passenger or ship's officer.³

Even where sailors lacked religious knowledge or awareness of God, they still quite often showed respect for the supernatural. They looked out for omens, premonitions or signs of disturbance in nature – birds, fish, astronomical phenomena – that might give warning of storm or danger. They clutched at ways of protecting themselves against their harsh environment, by prizing an infant's caul as a guard against drowning, for instance, or by avoiding inauspicious days for setting sail. They found nature awe-inspiring but that might lead as readily to superstition as to worship.

At the risk of imposing overmuch coherence on a complex picture of subtle developments and local exceptions, a provisional chronology is offered. The Catholic Church had devised tangible means of reminding sailors of their religious duties, with shrines and images aboard ship; a liturgy of prayer marked

² Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700–1750* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 169–85.

³ Peter Earle, *Sailors: English Merchant Seamen, 1650–1775* (1998), p. 105.

the passing hours at sea, while church-based fraternities cared for sailors ashore. The Reformation changed all this, and left the care of souls in the hands of ship masters. Through most of the seventeenth century prayers were commonly said at sea, sometimes daily or twice daily, and often on Sundays: afloat as ashore, it was still an age that treated religion with respect. The eighteenth-century mindset was more wary of religious controversy, and the reasonably educated classes from which ship's officers were drawn, increasingly sceptical themselves, attached less importance to maintaining a pattern of prayers for ships' crews. As long-distance voyaging became more usual, absence from home and family influence became increasingly protracted, and links with shore-based religious observance more tenuous. In consequence sailors tended to develop their own medley of syncretistic elements, blended according to taste from piety and paganism. Half-forgotten childhood Christianity might surface at times of danger, but deism, superstition and unbelief had plenty of adherents. It was not a world without religion, but it was a long way from the orthodoxy of Anglican parish life.

There were no port chaplains, no visiting ship evangelists, no clergy embarked specifically to minister to merchant crews. The largest East Indiamen were supposed to carry a chaplain but the company rated all its mid-eighteenth-century trading ships at 499 tons, just too small to require a clergyman. The quality of naval chaplains will be considered in more detail in due course, but the general picture will not greatly change. The eighteenth-century seafarer had little enough religion, and even when he called himself Christian he had scant knowledge of what that implied, and allowed it to impose few demands upon time or conduct.

Constantly aware of dangers at sea, sailors ashore were renowned for their reckless pursuit of transient pleasures such as drink, sex, conviviality, brawling or gambling, with scant regard for moral convention. One eighteenth-century sailor described his colleagues' shallow fickleness and abandoned conduct: 'no trouble softens their obdurate hearts, but as soon as the danger is past they return in the greatest avidity to practise wickedness and blaspheme their Maker and preserver.'⁴ Undoubtedly there were many men like that. Sailors' idiosyncratic spirituality sustained a pliant moral code, but that is not the whole story. They prized the values that made for community. Loyalty to messmates was the cardinal virtue, carrying with it a set of social obligations such as basic honesty with colleagues, and an overriding duty to give every support when lives were at risk. Those who knew them well were deeply impressed with crewmen's faithfulness to fellow seamen

⁴ Samuel Kelly, quoted in W. R. Hunt, 'Nautical Autobiography in the Age of Sail', *The Mariner's Mirror* [hereafter *MM*], LVII (1971), p. 142. Caul: skin membrane protecting a baby's head in the womb, discarded at birth. Alternative beliefs in Angelo S. Rappoport, *Superstitions of Sailors* (1928).

and their officers, their generosity and warmth of affection. Sea-going demanded hardihood and courage. Both qualities were characteristic of sailors, especially in defence of their colleagues or in pursuit of money. Often they dispensed with ordered family life, and settled instead for undemanding sexual liaisons in ports ashore, slipping into and out of such relationships like a vessel picking up or dropping moorings. A lack of formal education placed them at a disadvantage when faced with Government officials, lawyers, swindlers and crimps. They were bad at saving money, easily conned by rogue salesmen, and notoriously in thrall to publicans. They had a moral code of a kind, but it did not cover women or drink. Sailors became ready stereotypes, the courageous, resourceful man of the sea, who became a pathetic spendthrift ashore, unable to make a responsible life for himself in that unfamiliar environment.⁵

No simple character summary will suffice. There was a spectrum of beliefs and conduct, ranging from the irreligion that Rediker has identified as typical, to the latent Christian orthodoxy that the Blue Lights hoped for. Middleton and Kempenfelt were obviously right to recognise that sailors lacked pastors, teaching and opportunity for worship, and they began to address the problem. But if Rediker is right, if the predominant mindset of seafarers was unbelief, a different strategy of evangelism and persuasion would eventually be required. Did the secularised maritime culture of the eighteenth century represent the choice of sailors for a life without religious constraint, or was it a by-product of neglect by the Christian community ashore? A brief survey will show how closely related seafaring and religion had once been, and will explore how those links had been loosened if not wholly discarded, creating a massive challenge for naval evangelicalism.

Reformation England and its Navy

THE medieval Church evolved a complex apparatus of pastoral and moral care for the sailor which largely perished in post-Reformation England and was not adequately replaced by anything equivalent – until the time of the Blue

⁵ Vice-Admiral Sir Jahleel Brenton gives an example of this view: ‘The sufferings of seamen have but too generally been ... viewed as the inevitable consequences of intemperance and profligacy. ... The sailor is thoughtless, reckless and improvident to a degree which will scarcely be credited by those who are unacquainted with his character. ... From early youth the water becomes his element. ... From this circumstance he is necessarily unsettled in his views, has no conception of a permanent home. ... Dangers and hardships ... he meets and suffers ... with a steadfastness and endurance of which so tender an age would scarcely be thought capable. ... All who are familiar with the habits of the seaman will readily give him credit for a large portion of kindness and generosity.’ *An Appeal to the British Nation on Behalf of Her Sailors* (1838), pp. 7, 15, 35.

Lights. Claiming supreme spiritual authority over the lands and seas of Western Europe, the Church necessarily concerned itself with sailors who might be outside normal episcopal oversight but who were not outside the Christian polity. Sea-going ships were perceived as a part of Christendom where the Church had a major role in shaping offences and their punishment, morals, contracts and immunities. With its supra-national authority it gave a measure of protection to women, pilgrims and non-combatants; most ships carried a shrine at which some right of sanctuary was probably recognised. With its interest in pilgrim ships, crusading fleets and international trade in ecclesiastical goods the Church had a practical investment in seafaring, and addressed issues of safety and welfare as well as law.⁶

Monasteries and hermitages accepted an obligation to provide navigation beacons on dangerous stretches of coast. Early English lights, such as those on Bardsley or the Farnes, were hermit cells where monks maintained a prayer vigil as well as a night-time beacon. The Benedictines of Tynemouth Priory rang the church bell in time of fog as a warning to mariners. Sailors' guilds were often partially religious in character, and the Church provided much of the charitable support for their widows and orphans, and care for sick mariners. When a society of Bristol sailors set up St Bartholomew's hospital in 1445, for example, they provided beds for the medical care of twelve seamen, and money for a priest to minister to them. Coastal churches displayed *ex-voto* ship models as thanksgiving for deliverance from shipwreck, and memorial walls commemorated lives lost at sea. Each port held its patronal feast day with rituals, processions and celebrations. Ships were often given the names of saints to invoke heavenly protection, and services of blessing were held before crews left for distant voyages – and for fisheries, as still today in Brittany.⁷

Religion, then, gave structure to maritime law, customs and charities, but it faced a harder task in pastoring sailors once they had put to sea. Crews of pilgrim vessels or in a war squadron might have the benefit of a priest aboard to hear

⁶ R. F. Wright, 'The High Seas and the Church in the Middle Ages', *MM*, LIII (1967), pp. 3–31, 115–35.

⁷ Peter F. Anson, *The Church and the Sailor* (1948), pp. 31–7; Robert Miller, *From Shore to Shore: A History of the Church and the Merchant Seafarer* (privately printed, 1989), pp. 7–24; J. J. Keevil, *Medicine and the Navy, 1200–1900*, 1: 1200–1649 (1957), p. 11 (and *passim*, pp. 1–54). French Catholic practices are well treated in Alain Cabantous and Françoise Hildersheimer (eds.), *Foi chrétienne et milieux maritimes (XVI^e–XX^e siècles)*, *Actes du colloque*, Paris, *Collège de France*, Sept. 1987 (Paris, 1989), and Alain Cabantous, *Le Ciel dans la mer, christianisme et civilisation maritime XVI^e–XIX^e siècle* (Paris, 1990).

confession and celebrate the Mass (normally the 'dry Mass' without the sacred elements – for fear of spillage), but trading ships rarely embarked one. Nevertheless religion had an honoured place in daily routine. The crucifix or a religious image was placed conspicuously on the upper deck where all were expected to show reverence. Prayers were to be recited when the watch was changed and all hands were summoned for matins and vespers. In the England of Henry VIII, before the break with Rome, it was customary for an evening hymn to be sung before the image of Our Lady, and Queen Mary required that prayers should be said twice a day at sea, as had long been traditional practice. Two and a half centuries later these customs were still being faithfully observed aboard the ships of France and Spain (as Kempenfelt observed), where the ancient Catholic traditions had not been severed.⁸

In England the Reformation profoundly altered the religion of seafarers. The old rituals fell into disuse ashore, and the shrines and crucifixes lost their place aboard ship: with them went the most obvious focus for religious practice. With the disbanding of religious orders there no longer existed any organised fraternity to care for spiritual life afloat. And yet the break with Rome made religion more significant than ever in the culture of the sea. It became the test of loyalty and heresy – potentially matters of life and death. English merchants in contempt of papal decrees who forced their way into Spanish trading preserves were risking a heretic's death. Across Christendom and beyond, religion embodied corporate loyalties, and in England it pre-eminently defined nationhood. Since the fleet was the principal safeguard against any continental Catholic attempt to reverse the English Reformation, the navy's religious leaning determined whether or not Henry's measures would survive. If sailors forsook the new beliefs in favour of the old Catholic creed, the Tudor state would perish, along with the Church of England, the new land settlement and the Protestant succession.

The ancient custom of the sea punctuated the day with prayers, and might therefore leave a place for the old liturgy and beliefs. It was an important area to claim for Protestantism. Political prudence as much as piety led the Crown to demand definite religious observance – not just prayers, but the new Anglican liturgy, preferably conducted by a clergyman of the established church. In his orders of 1578 Frobisher directed that prayers must be said 'with the services usual in the Churches of England'. On his voyage of circumnavigation Drake took a chaplain to lead prayers for the crew and to celebrate Holy Communion

⁸ Gordon Taylor, *The Sea Chaplains: A History of the Chaplains in the Royal Navy* (Oxford, 1978), p. 12; Wright, 'The High Seas', p. 29; J. S. Corbett (ed.), *Signals and Instructions, 1776–1794*, NRS (1908), p. 366.

in accordance with the Elizabethan Book of Common Prayer; even after the two men had clashed and the chaplain had been publicly disgraced, the twice-daily ceremony of prayer continued, with Drake reading the service with the officers and Fletcher taking the service for the crew. To possess the Scriptures and to join in devotions from the English Book of Common Prayer were badges of the new Protestantism: when Lord Sheffield's surgeon was suspected of Catholic sympathies in 1588 he was able to clear himself by showing his New Testament and Anglican prayer book, together with a psalter 'which he daily sang with the company'. Where no clergy were carried, the master was expected to read psalms and intercessions, using, of course, the Anglican liturgy. The traditional custom of the sea survived, but in a manner that reinforced each day the new religion of the Tudors.⁹

N. A. M. Rodger has identified Protestantism as a key element in the emergence of British sea-power; the creation of a formidable fleet in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries grew out of Protestant England's isolation from mainland Europe and the danger that came of it. 'The governing classes were obsessed with the Popish menace ... It is impossible to imagine that a Catholic England would have been, or felt, so isolated and imperilled. It was because she became Protestant that she had so many reasons to build up a fleet.'¹⁰ If the Enterprise of England in 1588 was perceived by the Spanish as a holy war, the English were equally convinced that it was a struggle for the true faith. 'Their fleet consisteth of mighty ships and great strength', wrote Howard to Walsingham, 'yet we doubt not, by God's good assistance, to oppress them.' 'We shall be able, with God's favour, to weary them out of the sea and confound them', wrote Hawkins, and Drake too saw the campaign in similar terms: 'God give us grace to depend upon him; so shall we not doubt victory, for our cause is good.'¹¹ The political elite willingly accepted the tax burden of a huge maritime establishment because it perceived continental Catholic Europe as a threat to its survival. Ideology fuelled the rise of sea-power and, as Peter Padfield has intriguingly shown, fed upon it. The ocean was not a neutral milieu but an arena of conceptual conflict as well as national

⁹ Miller, p. 18: note Frobisher's emphasis on moral conduct 'to banish swearing, dice and card playing, and filthy communication'; Anon., 'Drake's Voyage Round the World', pp. 143–67, in J. Hampden (ed.), *The Tudor Venturers* (1970), p. 164 (Folio Society edn of Richard Hakluyt, *Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffics and Discoveries of the English Nation*, 1589); Taylor, pp. 33f.; Keevil, 1, p. 68.

¹⁰ N. A. M. Rodger, *A Naval History of Britain*, 11: *The Command of the Ocean, 1649–1815* (2004), p. 577.

¹¹ J. K. Laughton (ed.), *State Papers Relating to the Defeat of the Spanish Armada, 1588*, 2 vols., NRS (1895–1900, reissued 1981), 1, pp. 241, 360, 365.

rivalry. New ideas travelled with river-borne and sea-going traders, exposing sailors to radical thinking.¹² No Government – particularly a Protestant English one – could willingly abandon the moral and religious guardianship of its navy.

Daily prayer continued to be routine well into the seventeenth century. Privy Council instructions to the Earl of Rutland in 1623 referred to ‘common prayer and the singing of psalms’ as ‘the ancient custom of relieving and setting of watches’, and this applied in every ship whether a clergyman was embarked or not. There is no reason to suppose that such prayers were unwelcome to crews. After all, the prevailing culture believed in a God who answered prayer, the Creator who controlled wind strength and sea state. When the *Golden Hind* was stranded on a Pacific reef in 1580 Drake called the chaplain to celebrate Communion for the crew before a last desperate effort to free her; when the ship was saved he led them in thanksgiving. It was usual for fleets going on war service to be accompanied by chaplains – Cadiz 1596, Algiers 1620, Buckingham’s expeditions to the Île de Rhé and La Rochelle 1627 and 1628 – and for prayers to be offered before battle. Who would wish to die without the comfort of religion? As the *Constant Reformation* began to founder in heavy seas in 1651, those who could not escape in the boats joined her chaplain to partake of Holy Communion before they perished.¹³

Religion reinforced morale; it also carried a powerful political message. The unsettling ambiguities of Charles I’s policies towards Catholicism were partially resolved by his recruiting Anglican clergy as ‘preachers’ for every ship. When liturgy and ministers changed after the first civil war, a new order of worship was provided: *A Supply of Prayer for the Ships of this Kingdom that want* [i.e. lack] *Ministers to pray with them* (1646) took the place of the now discredited Book of Common Prayer. It remained important that the navy’s religious stance should be uncompromisingly Protestant and yet as devout as it had been in Catholic times. As Lord High Admiral the Earl of Warwick, in his fleet orders, called for daily prayer, Sunday services and respect for religion, regulations which were superseded by Parliament’s Articles of War in 1652; with similar wording they demanded that ‘preaching and praying and other religious duties be exercised ... and the Lord’s Day religiously observed.’ Cromwell’s navy saw itself as the sword of the Lord against Catholic Spain, Islamic Algerines and even those errant Protestants the Dutch. Before the action off Dungeness in 1652 prayers were said in every ship; a

¹² Peter Padfield, *Maritime Supremacy and the Opening of the Western Mind* (1999), pp. 1–6.

¹³ Taylor, p. 64; John Cummins, *Francis Drake* (1995; pbk edn 1997), pp. 121f.; Waldo E. L. Smith, *The Navy and its Chaplains in the Days of Sail* (Toronto, 1961), p. 18; W. Laird Clowes, *The Royal Navy, a History from the Earliest Times to the Present*, 7 vols. (1897–1903), 1, pp. 429f.; Taylor, pp. 62, 66f.

day of humiliation before God was observed before the fleet sailed to the attack on Porto Farina in 1655. In anticipation of battle at Santa Cruz in 1657 there was 'earnest seeking to the Lord for His presence', and after his victory Blake wrote in his official despatch, 'we desire the Lord may have the praise and glory, to whom alone it is due.' Those Puritan sailors had come to identify their naval operations as the service of God, in terms that might have been echoed by their Victorian successors, but perhaps by few individuals before the mid-nineteenth century.¹⁴

Soon after his return to the throne Charles II defined the religious stance of the new Royal Navy in the 1661 Articles of War. It was to be as Protestant and Anglican as the king himself at that time. The first regulation required commanding officers to cause the public worship of Almighty God to be 'solemnly, orderly and reverently' conducted according to the liturgy of the Church of England. 'Prayers and preachings' were to be diligently performed by chaplains in holy orders, and the Lord's Day was to be observed. These measures replaced Parliament's Articles from 1652 but kept the fervour of its wording. The navy's Protestantism was an amalgam of conviction, prejudice, xenophobia and tradition. After James II's conversion he advanced a few Catholic officers but made little headway in altering the culture afloat. In 1688 the navy's essential Protestantism was personified by Admiral Herbert – devoid of both charm and piety – who was crucial in switching the fleet's loyalty from James II to William of Orange. In his Anglican days as Lord High Admiral James had been a brave and successful commander, but reputation could not help him once he embarked on his Catholic policies. By choosing to avoid battle with the Dutch in 1688, the predominantly Protestant fleet became England's king-maker, and its support for the Protestant Succession thereafter was key to the survival of William III and Anne, and the transfer of the Crown to the Hanoverian dynasty.¹⁵

Religion, then, which had been so important in the creation of a powerful fleet, was a prominent component of the naval profession. It flaunted its Protestantism and Anglican liturgy. Nonetheless there are reasons to doubt whether there was much depth of piety in this religion. How far was anything being done for

¹⁴ Taylor, pp. 66, 72; Michael Oppenheim, *A History of the Administration of the Royal Navy from 1509 to 1660* (1896), pp. 311f.; A. G. Kealy, *Chaplains of the Royal Navy, 1626–1903* (Portsmouth, 1905), p. 13; J. R. Powell, *Robert Blake, General-at-Sea* (1972), pp. 187, 261; J. R. Powell (ed.), *The Letters of Robert Blake*, NRS (1937), pp. 368f. – his will, p. 342.

¹⁵ An Act for the Establishing Articles and Orders for the regulating and better Government of His Majesties Navies Ships of Warr and Forces by Sea: 13 Car. II, c.9, *Statutes of the Realm* (1819), v, pp. 311–14.

the souls of sailors? Examination of this question must begin once more with the Reformation, and the changed relationship between the Church and seafarers.

The Pastoral Care of Sailors

THE Reformation dismantled the sophisticated apparatus for the care of sailors which the Catholic Church had developed over centuries. Removing images from ships was the most obvious but not the most significant of the changes. With the disbandment of religious fraternities much was lost in the way of practical care for sick and destitute seafarers and of support for their dependants. There were no friars to go to sea, no corps of priests to minister afloat, no religious order to look out for sailors, no voice to speak consistently for their spiritual needs. When captains or fleet commanders recruited clergy to serve afloat, it was for a specific expedition or an individual ship, never for general naval service. The Bishop of London licensed clergy to serve afloat, but that was as far as organisation went. The Church of England was slow to recognise any general responsibility for the care of maritime souls.

This was partly a result of reformed theology. In Catholic thinking, the sacraments were needful for salvation, and only priests could administer them: unless the Church were to regard all sailors as lost souls it had to find ways of keeping them in touch with a sacramental ministry, with opportunity for confession and the Mass. Protestant teaching stressed the need for personal faith rather than reception of the sacraments as the way of salvation: there was therefore less urgency about appointing clergy to sea service. Let prayers be said at sea, of course, but look to the parish church for teaching, baptism and communion. This strategy was flawed for two main reasons. First, the scrapping of so many rituals and festivals connected with the sea had left the sailor with fewer links to parish life, and secondly the character of seafaring was changing, as the range of maritime trade increased, making regular worship ashore more difficult for the sailor.

Coastal fishermen and short-haul seamen would return to their home ports at frequent intervals, and might reasonably keep in touch with local life including church. As lengthy deep-water voyaging became more typical of English merchant shipping in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, seafarers could expect longer absence from home, and attenuated contact with worship ashore. Normal parish life did not fit with the rhythms of seafaring which reflected wind and tide, the fishing season or availability of cargo in preference to the church calendar. Clergy ashore had relatively little influence over men whose adolescence (and perhaps even childhood) was spent on the high seas, who were inevitably away from home for most of their working lives, and who did not readily settle to family life. French coastal fishermen returning to port after relatively brief

intervals preserved their church-going, and priests working with mothers and families ashore had some success in keeping up religious observance amongst their menfolk as well. Reformation England risked secularising the seafaring community by dismantling the shrines and images, and by scrapping so many of the earlier rituals of blessings, fasts and festivals that used to punctuate the life of the seafaring community.¹⁶

The Reformers were clear in their own minds that religious ceremonies were harmful unless accompanied by faith: they led a man to trust in the efficacy of what he was doing rather than what Christ had done. There was therefore no loss in the removal of pictures and carvings which could lead the ignorant into virtual idolatry or superstition. But what would take their place? The answer of the Reformed theologians was clear: it must be the Scriptures, the Word of God made accessible to all in language they could understand. It is significant that chaplains in Howard's fleet were described as 'preachers', but sailors needed more than sermons.¹⁷ At sea they endured risk as a daily reality; in port they faced the lure of taverns and brothels away from the steadying influence of family or parish. Their hard drinking, loose living, gambling and recklessness with money created self-inflicted hardships, but these vices owed much to a lack of moral nurturing in youth. They needed all the help that religion and charity could bring. Protestant sailors had the same material needs as before, but the ancient structures of social security had gone when the spiritual orders had been dissolved. There is room for some detailed comparison of welfare arrangements for destitute and sick sailors and for their dependants before and after the break with Rome. Did private charity and the Chatham Chest adequately compensate for the old gilds and fraternities, the *maisons dieu* and hospitals? Perhaps they did, but the lingering suspicion remains that the new focus on preaching and faith was not accompanied by so much social activity as before. When the Blue Lights took up what was known as the Sailor's Cause more than two centuries later, they found plenty of human suffering in the maritime community, and little being done by church or state to alleviate it. Greenwich Hospital served a fortunate few, but there were plenty of destitute sailors and impoverished families in every port.

Even the directly religious ministry was patchy. In time of war clergy could be found to accompany the fleet, but once the fighting was over, ships' companies were left too often to the religion of established routine – Sunday service, daily prayers and psalms as long as they were in vogue, but rarely a sermon, a tract, or a

¹⁶ For French customs, see Cabantous, *Le Ciel dans la mer*.

¹⁷ At least six 'preachers' were embarked for operations against the Armada, and were awarded a pay rise: Laughton, *Spanish Armada*, II, p. 231.

service of Holy Communion. In Commonwealth times, when the Puritan experiment relied on the loyalty of its navy, Parliament sent ministers to preach and new services of prayer to be used in ships without chaplains, giving the most sustained attention yet to the spiritual needs of the whole fleet. The central Government had seen how important it was to send good pastors afloat and to maintain the old routines of sea-going religion, for one of their ships had been lost to the cause in 1648 because of the random whims and inconsistencies of well-intentioned ministers who did not understand sailors: 'we had no settled form of Divine Worship', protested a group who went off to join the Royalists, 'no Communion, little or no Preaching on board but by illiterate and mechanical persons.' The terms of the protest demonstrate how mid-century sailors acknowledged spiritual needs that went deeper than liturgical repetition.¹⁸

However widespread such fervour may have been in the 1650s, it was checked by the Restoration. In the King's ships a few chaplains were found, but according to Pepys their numbers were small and quality poor. In default of ministers to do the work, the pastoral care of sailors would fall upon their officers, and particularly the captain. As we have seen, there was a long tradition of religious observance at sea, and codes of conduct approved by the Church: in any ship the master was expected to uphold both. When Charles II promulgated the Articles of War in 1661, it seemed entirely appropriate for commanding officers to be made responsible for the moral and religious welfare of crews, but what in practice would it mean? There were fine words about the public worship of Almighty God, with 'prayers and preachings' from the chaplains, and general observance of the Lord's Day; profanity and 'scandalous actions in derogation of God's honour and corruption of good manners' were subject to punishment. Although these measures gave authority to chaplains and insisted on Sunday prayers, they did not go far to ensure depth of pastoral care. In a ship without a chaplain, would there be any religious instruction for the boys in her crew? Daily prayers were not mentioned: had they begun to disappear already, together with the Puritan fervour that had probably kept the practice alive for the last decade? Since, in Pepys's judgement, far too few captains troubled to find a chaplain, how would religion fare at sea when left in the hands of laymen? Any ship master might enforce acceptable conduct but only a handful would ever have made spiritual guides. There was every danger that sailors who went to sea ignorant of religion would stay that way.¹⁹

¹⁸ Taylor, p. 74.

¹⁹ J. R. Tanner (ed.), *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Naval Manuscripts in the Pepysian Library at Magdalene College, Cambridge*, NRS, 4 vols. (1903–23), I, p. 219; see n. 15 above.

Scattered evidence suggests that in places religious practice was faithfully observed. The Quaker seaman Edward Coxere describes evening prayers being led by the master in a merchantman well after the Restoration, and the chaplain Henry Teonge managed to hold divine service most Sundays in a warship during Charles II's reign. Taking a view of the service as a whole, however, Pepys the Secretary of the Navy believed that morality and religion were both in decline: in the 1670s he noted the 'debauchery and impiety ... too generally found in the navy', and he attributed this to a lack of chaplains. He deplored how few captains troubled to take a clergyman to sea, and 'the ill choice generally made of those that are entertained, both for ignorance and debauches, to the great dishonour of God and the Government, and the encouragement of profaneness and dissolutions [dissoluteness] in the fleet.' Keen to ensure that every ship of fifth rate and larger should have its own chaplain, Pepys recommended better screening by the church authorities and better payment from the Admiralty. Helpful as these reforms were, they failed to bring sufficient clergy aboard. Frustrating as it seemed to Pepys, the appointing of chaplains depended on ships' captains, and if lay interest in religion was flagging there was little that the Secretary of the Admiralty could do. Teonge's diary tells of Sunday services usually with a sermon, but there is no reference to daily prayer. Occasional pamphlet writers such as Robert Crosfield in 1693 and a former Commonwealth sea-captain in 1707 deplored the decline of religion, fearing the divine judgement which might be incurred and calling for a mending of morals 'lest otherwise Heaven as well as the Common Enemy be engag'd against you.' While Pepys and pamphleteers may have exaggerated, their picture of neglect was not fanciful.²⁰

During the wars that closed the seventeenth and opened the eighteenth centuries naval religion underwent something of a revival. Perhaps to reaffirm

²⁰ E. H. W. Meyerstein (ed.), *Adventures by Sea of Edward Coxere* [written between 1685 and 1694] (Oxford, 1945), p. 88; G. E. Manwaring (ed.), *The Diary of Henry Teonge, Chaplain on board HM Ships Assistance, Bristol and Royal Oak, 1675–79* (1927), *passim*; Tanner, iv, pp. 383, 400ff.; R. Crosfield, 'England's Glory Revived' (1693), in J. S. Bromley (ed.), *The Manning of the Royal Navy, Selected Public Pamphlets, 1693–1873* (1976), p. 3; Anon., *An Inquiry into the Causes of our Naval Miscarriages* (2nd edn, London, 1710), p. 27 [originally *The Old and True Way of Manning the Fleet*, 1707]. Compare Rodger, *Command of the Ocean*, p. 215: there is some evidence that religious observance in the fighting fleet declined after the Restoration but it should be used with caution. One ex-Commonwealth sea captain noticed the difference when religion was neglected and speech corrupted – 'nothing but damning and sinking and coarse obscene conversation to be heard aboard our men-o'-war': there was, he felt, no need to search further for causes of England's eclipse at sea: *Naval Miscarriages*, p. 12. Rodger explains that some

England's Protestantism and to shore up the loyalty of the fleet, the Church ashore thought kindly of its sailors and provided them with clergy. It may have owed something to William III's Proclamation against Vice in 1692, and the renewed religious spirit which created both the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge in 1698 and the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts in 1701. A fresh concern for religious observance is found in the Mediterranean fleet when the Rev. John Hext became chaplain to Sir George Rooke; with the admiral's encouragement he held prayers twice a day in the flagship, and hoped the practice would spread to other ships. All chaplains in the squadron in priests' orders were expected to celebrate Communion, once again at Rooke's behest. At last an admiral was accepting a responsibility for spiritual welfare that went beyond routine prayers, and now that the SPCK was beginning its activities, there was an agency to give help. In 1700 the Rev. Patrick Gordon, chaplain of the *Salisbury*, became SPCK Correspondent for the Navy, and it appears to have been his idea to have a tract commissioned especially for issue to seamen. As a result Dr Josiah Woodward wrote *The Seaman's Monitor*, destined to be the longest lived of all sailors' tracts, and a powerful call to Christian faith and commitment. The SPCK supplied the fleets of Rooke and Shovell with 14,000 copies in 1701, aiming to provide one for every pair of sailors. Where chaplains were reluctant to distribute them, Rooke ordered it done. Bearing in mind the overt evangelistic purpose of *The Seaman's Monitor*, this surely means that Rooke had some notion, however vague, that sailors needed the Gospel. Where admirals led captains followed, and in this new climate 350 chaplains were appointed to warships during the War of Spanish Succession. Recruitment was helped no doubt by a measure of 1697, allowing a naval chaplaincy to be held without abandoning a living ashore: it was a concession which helped with a temporary shortage, but it further emphasised the navy's lack of a dedicated profession of sea-going clergy who would identify with sailors and be truly accepted by them.²¹

criticisms of naval administration were couched in religious terms as an acceptable code understood by contemporaries; even so, the force of the argument would disappear if there were no basis in fact.

²¹ David Ogg, *England in the Reigns of James II and William III* (Oxford, 1955; pbk edn 1969), pp. 53off.; Taylor, p. 123; A. E. Barker, *The SPCK and the Armed Forces*, SPCK leaflet (n.d.); Josiah Woodward, *The Seaman's Monitor, or Advice to Sea-faring Men, with Reference to their Behaviour before, in and after their Voyage* (1700); Mark Harris, 'Naval Chaplains in the late Seventeenth and early Eighteenth Century', *MM*, LXXXI (1995), p. 208. The official seal of the SPG showed a clergyman arriving by sea in response to the prayers of the people of North America: the first

How much of this revival was due to a genuine care for souls, motivated by spiritual zeal, and how far was it aimed at ensuring the Protestant Succession in England? With the state and religion so intertwined it becomes impossible to distinguish clearly between piety and politics. On a private level religion could help with personal moral issues and a sense of well-being. In a letter to the SPCK Gordon explained that he was concerned for 'the reformation of the seamen', meaning their moral improvement, and to make righteousness more appealing he proposed to distribute tobacco along with his tracts. Was all this to promote high morale, or good discipline, or to win converts? Perhaps all three, for religion could serve more than one purpose.²²

Whatever the driving force behind this new burst of piety, its energies were soon spent. After 1714 there were few approaches to the SPCK for its literature. The request of the captain of the *Princess Amelia* for 'some Books of Divinity' in 1739 broke a lengthy silence. Clergy largely avoided going to sea: barely ten chaplains a year entered the navy between the Treaty of Utrecht and the start of the American War, and few stayed beyond a single commission. As a type they lacked commitment to the navy, but the problem ran much deeper than that, as quite a proportion showed little sense of vocation. Sea-going religion – as will be demonstrated – slid further into an obsolescence which its paid representatives failed to halt. The Church of England whether at sea or on land largely neglected seafarers and did little either for their practical needs or for the good of their souls. The Admiralty left their spiritual health in the hands of captains who might or might not choose to ship a clergyman, and responsibility for general welfare – health, accommodation, pay, family – pretty well ended when they were discharged ashore at the end of a commission.²³

Who might befriend him, educate and better him? The answer is compellingly obvious. Jack's officers – not Admiralty officials but his own ship's captain and lieutenants, perhaps the master and warrant officers, the people he learned to trust through shared danger, the people who knew and liked him in return – these were almost the only ones who consistently looked after sailors and protected their interests. Blue Lights came from this sector of the profession, but their interest in sailors' welfare was by no means unusual. Nelson as a young captain was prepared

Anglican missionary to America was given passage in the fourth rate *Centurion*. William's Proclamation was renewed by Queen Anne, and by George III. The text of the 1760 Proclamation is given in *The Bye-Laws and Regulations of the Marine Society* (1772; 4th edn 1792), pp. xi–xiv.

²² Barker, p. 1.

²³ SPCK Minutes Books, 1739; General Meeting of 25 September.

to stretch legality to breaking point on behalf of his boatswain in trouble, and Collingwood was once found in tears after paying off a ship's company whom he regarded as family. Compared with such personal interest from those who knew him best, the sailor had poor support from the organised Church ashore and its ordained representatives afloat. A vigorous movement of lay piety in the fleet might yet reach seamen with the Gospel, and bring this unevangelised class into the Christian orbit.²⁴

Eighteenth-Century Naval Regulations

IN view of declining interest in the SPCK and the slump in both numbers and quality of chaplains, it is surprising to find religion given prominence once more when *Regulations and Instructions Relating to His Majesty's Service at Sea* were first issued by the Admiralty in 1731, to define obligations for its commanding officers. This document was reissued with some emendations until the thirteenth edition of 1790; it was not superseded until 1806. Unaltered throughout this period were requirements for divine service to be held twice a day according to the Anglican liturgy, with a sermon on Sunday. Swearing and cursing, frequently directed against authority, could be understood as offences against discipline, but blasphemy – contempt for God – was also to be punished, by fines and the wearing of a 'wooden collar or some other shameful badge of distinction'. Later Blue Lights saw an opportunity for spiritual renewal in these measures, but it must be highly doubtful that they were framed with such deliberate purpose.²⁵

Did they reflect the customs of the time, when church going was normal and daily prayers were routine in many households ashore? Perhaps they were the product of administrative inertia, if the Secretary who framed them, Thomas Corbett, merely transcribed the provisions of Charles II's day when religion had been more of an issue. We cannot be sure of the motive but religious revival is unlikely since chaplains were almost totally ignored. No instructions were included for them, and they gained only a brief reference to their pay (19 shillings a [lunar] month) and entitlement to a servant. Nor would crusading zeal fit Lord Torrington, First Lord from 1727 to 1733: he had hitched his wagon to the Protestant cause, but he is not usually regarded as strongly driven by religion. Yet while creed was still an issue in the nation at large it made sense to reaffirm the navy's Protestantism, as a bulwark against Jacobite claimants and their Catholic allies.

²⁴ John Sugden, *Nelson: A Dream of Glory* (2004), pp. 320–9; Rodger, *Command of the Ocean*, p. 491.

²⁵ Rules of Discipline and Good Government, article 4, *Regulations and Instructions Relating to His Majesty's Service at Sea* (1731) [hereafter *RAI* 1731], p. 44.

Whatever the intention behind the *Regulations*, they did not usher in a period of religious zeal in the navy's public life.²⁶

In the succeeding three decades it became a matter of note when an admiral insisted on regular public worship or took measures to curb profanity – as Norris in 1735 and later both Anson and Hawke. Samples of ships' logs tell the same story of infrequent Sunday services. If the Lord's Day was neglected despite official direction, it is surely safe to infer that daily prayer had disappeared. Scattered references in ships' records, published reminiscences and private correspondence give a coherent story of religion retreating into personal conviction, still guiding morality and giving inner strength perhaps, but no longer the focus for collective shipboard life. Had it been otherwise, the Blue Lights would have lacked a cause to promote.²⁷

By 1742, when Charles Middleton went to sea, the religious part of *Regulations* had become a dead letter, with daily prayer unknown and Sunday services a rarity. As he recalled:

I was sixteen years in the sea service before I was made a captain, and never, during that time, heard prayers or divine service performed a-board of ship, nor any pains taken to check vice or immorality further than they interfered with the common duty of the ship. As soon as I became a captain I began reading prayers myself to the ship's company of a Sunday and also a sermon. I continued this practice as long as I was in commission and without a chaplain, and it never was omitted when I had one. I did not indeed venture to carry it further than Sundays, because the practice was confined to those days by the very few ships who had chaplains, when followed at all; and I should only have acquired the name of methodist or enthusiast if I attempted it.²⁸

How is this disregard for *Regulations* to be explained? Captains still took seriously their responsibility for the conduct of crews, as their instructions required, but they had come to see this as a disciplinary rather than moral charge. Samples of ships' logs from the 1760s contain only occasional references to Sunday worship – although duties were habitually lightened for one day in seven. In unconscious

²⁶ As Sir George Byng, Torrington had been a wartime flag officer under Rooke, and the *Regulations* reflect the good practice in his fleet.

²⁷ G. Hinchliffe, 'Some Letters of Sir John Norris', *MM*, LVI (1970), pp. 77–84; also S. W. C. Pack, *Admiral Lord Anson* (1960), p. 12; and Ruddock F. Mackay, *Admiral Hawke* (Oxford, 1965), p. 2.

²⁸ *BP*, II, p. 163.

parody of a solemn assembly for the Lord's Day, hands were regularly mustered for a reading of the Articles of War, which spelt out the awesome authority of commanding officers, reminded officers and men of their duty to obey and rehearsed the penalty for non-compliance. A stern litany it was, with death the normal punishment for mutiny, desertion or wilful defiance, while the captain was to punish lesser offences according to the custom of the sea. There was nothing here to lift the spirits, not even a rudimentary effort to acknowledge the Creator. Religion as a definition of loyalty had been displaced by secular controls. After 1745, when the chance of a Catholic restoration had dwindled to vanishing, the new Hanoverian security could safely neglect religion.

The intellectual climate of the age suited these rearranged priorities. Enlightened thought made scepticism congenial: educated minds were turning to rational enquiry and empirical science instead of revealed religion. Doubt was becoming fashionable, not just doubt as to which religion might be true, but doubt concerning all religions. The officer corps prided itself on technical expertise, scientific outlook, mathematical skill and modern thinking as parts of its professionalism. The navy used the most advanced technology to keep its fleets at sea; its explorers were using cutting-edge navigational and cartographic skills; its physicians were increasingly mastering age-old problems of medicine and diet, and sea-going surgeons were often outstanding practitioners. In such a world of new doubts and fresh discoveries, thoughtful officers were becoming more interested in deism than old beliefs. John Newton and Andrew Burn felt its allure, and Richard Marks found it still active in the early 1800s. Deism was a popular form of agnostic religion: it accepted the existence of God as an explanation of origins and guarantor of ethics, but doubted any divine intervention in the affairs of mankind. While it could coexist quite happily with Enlightened thinking, it saw little point in intercessory prayer and was embarrassed by fervent piety. With doubt and deism gaining ground amongst the educated classes, the navy's growing secularism probably owed as much to Enlightenment values as to negligence or overriding duties.²⁹

If captains were unwilling to fulfil their pastoral and religious tasks, the chaplains, lacking both in numbers and authority, were unable to fill the breach. In the first place there were not enough to staff the ships entitled to one, and in the second they were entirely dependent upon their captains for the right to carry out their ministry. Even if we allow that the few chaplains who served many years and several commissions in the navy were men of spiritual effectiveness – and that

²⁹ The Rev. John Newton (1725–1807); Major General Andrew Burn, Royal Marines (1742–1814); Lieutenant the Rev. Richard Marks (1778–1847); see p. 282 below for Newton, p. 109 for Burn, and p. 253 for Marks.

is not proven – their influence would have been confined to a small number of ships. There were no Admiralty Instructions to guide and empower the chaplain. He had no career structure and no archdeacon to care for his interests or to keep him up to the mark. Appointed by Admiralty warrant, he belonged not to the chaplains' branch or to the navy in general, but to one specific ship. Once that ship's commission ended, the chaplain, like all her foremast hands, was discharged ashore, unemployed until another captain might apply for him. Aboard ship he held an anomalous position. A gentleman by education, his social rank was equivalent to the commissioned officers of the wardroom, but he had no rights there: he must normally eat and live amongst his social inferiors, the warrant officers of the gunroom. The largest part of his floating parish was made up of lower-deck sailors, but the social hierarchy of the ship and the complexities of her layout made it hard for him to mingle with them, to create enough trust to bridge the social divide and enable him to counsel men's souls.³⁰

According to Middleton, few chaplains were in priests' orders, and so had no authority to celebrate Holy Communion. No clergy were likely to be attracted to naval service because of the opportunities for ministry. All was so dependent upon the captain, who could readily find an excuse to forbid service in the state of the weather or the demands of naval necessity. Nor were the material compensations large enough. The chaplain was paid at the rate of an able seaman, supplemented by 'groats' of four pence per month deducted from the pay of each member of the crew, and enhanced perhaps by prize money. He had a cramped cabin to himself amongst the other warrant officers of the gunroom, with a swinging cot, small desk and a chair, set about with removable walls of canvas and light wood.³¹

None of this might have deterred a man with vocation, but the problems ran deeper still. He was essentially an interloper who did not truly belong. By background and training he was a landsman who had strayed aboard. One eighteenth-century chaplain who was refused protracted leave of absence wrote in astonishment that he had not expected to 'be obliged to be near the ship or on board'. The simple fact was that he had no permanent place in the navy, no career structure afloat, and, unless he was fortunate in his friends ashore, no ready way

³⁰ For chaplains, the standard work is by Taylor. See also the important study, N. A. M. Rodger, 'The Naval Chaplain in the Eighteenth Century', *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, xviii (1995), pp. 33–45, and Smith, *The Navy and its Chaplains*.

³¹ Chaplain's cabin in HMS *Gloucester*, 1812, depicted in 'The Rev. Edward Mangin's Journal', in H. G. Thursfield (ed.), *Five Naval Journals, 1789–1817*, NRS (1951), facing p. 10.