



## Background

In 2017, we embarked on an ESRC funded<sup>1</sup> study of faith and its practice on board multinational vessels, the needs of seafarers in relation to welfare, spirituality and religion, and the work of staff, volunteers and port chaplains working in ports in the UK and in other parts of the world.

Our intention was to provide an understanding of the changing nature of religion in globalised workplaces; an insight into the religious needs, practices, and understandings of industrial workers on ships and religious workers in contemporary ports; an understanding of religion and spirituality beyond formal religious settings; and the study of religious professionals.

In this report we summarise our findings in a format that we hope will be accessible to a wide audience including industry stakeholders, students, seafarers and the general public.

## Methods

We conducted research on board vessels engaged in commercial voyages, in UK ports and in international settings where port chaplains could be identified.

### Shipboard Research

- Non-participant observation and semi-structured interviews were utilised on board two different vessels crewed by individuals from different countries.
- Ship A was owned and operated by an established South-East Asian company
- Ship B was owned in China and operated by a shipmanagement company whose central offices are located elsewhere.
- The length of the combined voyages was 89 days.

The vessels were crewed by American, Chinese, Latvian, Sri Lankan, Swedish, Norwegian, and Filipino seafarers who between them self-affiliated to eight religions (Buddhism, Baptist Church, Potter's House, Iglesia Filipina Independiente, Jehovah's Witness, Jesus Is Lord Church, Lutheran Church, Roman Catholicism) and to atheism. While the vast majority of the seafarers on board were Roman Catholics each ship displayed a degree of religious diversity (please see Table 1 for details) and we uncovered a considerable range of beliefs held by members of the same religion emphasising that a single religious affiliation does not represent homogenous belief.

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Table 1: The faith and nationalities of the seafarers on board ships A and B

	Filipino	Chinese	Swedish	Norwegian	Latvian	American	Sri Lankan	Total
Atheist	0	3	0	1	1	1	0	6
Roman Catholic	37	0	0	0	0	0	0	37
Buddhist	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	2
Jesus is Lord	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Iglesia Filipina	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Lutheran	0	0	1	2	0	0	0	3
Baptist Church	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Jehovah's Witness	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Potter's House (Christian Pentecostal)	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Total	43	4	1	3	1	1	2	55

It was not possible to select ships according to the religious beliefs of the seafarers on board as this information is not known to the crew agents who supply seafarers to vessels, nor to the ship operators or owners. We therefore sought out ships which carried multinational crews. Once we identified companies which employed seafarers in multinational crews we approached them to ask if they would be willing to allow us to undertake shipboard research and if they could identify suitable vessels for us taking into account our desire to maximise our chances of finding seafarers of different faiths on board and our need to sail on board vessels which did not transit high risk areas (prohibited by the companies and the University Ethics Committee).

Most seafarers in the international fleet are Filipino and Chinese (BIMCO ICS 2021) and these two major groups are supplemented by Indians, Europeans (who are most frequently officers) and a variety of others. Once on board a vessel, our practice is to negotiate access with individual seafarers stressing the voluntary nature of participation. Sailing with seafarers allows us to create strong trust-based relationships which encourage involvement. In relation to this project, all seafarers, bar one, took part in interviews allowing us to capture the thoughts and views of almost all those on board the selected vessels.

## Port-based research

Port-based research was undertaken in two large port regions which were served by major seafarers' centres. One centre was run by a major faith-based charity dedicated to seafarers' welfare and one was independent of national organisations but was run by local faith-based charitable organisations dedicated to seafarers' welfare. A total of six months was spent in the two catchment areas served by these organisations undertaking observations in the centres, accompanying workers, chaplains, and volunteers on ship-visits, and carrying out both formal and informal interviews.

## Shore-based interviews (excluding those undertaken as part of the port-based fieldwork)

We supplemented our shipboard and port-based research with 11 formal interviews with representatives from the main charitable bodies connected to seafarers' welfare (5 in the UK and 6 based outside the UK) and with seven additional chaplains/volunteers providing welfare services for seafarers in both UK (1) and non-UK (6) ports (see Table 2).

Table 2: Additional Interviews

	UK-based	Non-UK-based
Formal interviews with chaplains/volunteers	1	6
Formal interviews with stakeholder charities	5	6

Interviews were transcribed and anonymised and were analysed with the assistance of NVivo software. The research was conducted with oversight from the Cardiff University School of Social Sciences' Ethics Committee.

## Key Findings

### Religion in globalised (shipboard) workplaces

Life on board a cargo ship is challenging (Sampson 2013). Due to the long periods of time which are spent living on board, it is experienced by many seafarers as a sacrifice of their lives. Isolation from communities ashore has the potential to leave seafarers lonely, and vulnerable to abuse, which can result in poor mental health (Sampson and Ellis 2019). Loneliness can be compounded by poor relationships on board particularly at the beginning of a career when seafarers are more vulnerable to bullying and harassment (Gould 2010). In this context, **some seafarers described faith as helpful in withstanding difficult emotional shipboard conditions.**

*When I was a cadet. [...] I really felt the pains of homesickness. And it was made worse by your inconsiderate workmates. Then it happened again when I was already a third mate. Our captain was a genuine pain-in-the-ass. That time I really wanted to sign off at once. [...] When that happened, I was on my own and God was just there, and he's the only one you could talk to. (Roman Catholic, Filipino, Officer)*

Seafaring is a relatively dangerous occupation. Emergencies at sea are often associated with storms, mechanical failure, collisions and groundings. At these times, **some seafarers described drawing upon their faith to increase their resilience in dealing with stressful and dangerous workplace situations.**



*[...] we had a hole in the bow because when the waves hit the anchor it smashed against the bow and it created a hole there. The pump room became flooded as a result of that. We were in the middle of the ocean. Nobody was working anymore aside from those on the bridge and those in the engine room doing some necessary monitoring of the equipment. We just waited for the weather to calm down. [...] All of us were already instructed to wear life vest just in case. I was already prepared for the worst. If there was a call of abandon ship, then I should be ready for it. [...] That was the time when I felt that I really needed God in my life. (Roman Catholic, Filipino, Rating)*

**Many seafarers engage in faith-based routines which they hope will offer them some protection from ill-fate.** In some cases, this involves carrying something with totemic significance such as a religious artefact.

*I have a small piece of paper, with a prayer printed. It is attached to bag. [...] Like a poster, a small one. This prayer from this temple. [...] It's mostly for seamen, use for safety. [...] It keeps me safe at sea. (Buddhist, Chinese, Officer)*



**The overwhelming view amongst seafarers that religion was a personal matter to be respected but not usually discussed.**

*Not many want to discuss religion, maybe a few and it is very rare. And of course, discussing religion is a bit tricky really because we don't share the same beliefs. Even amongst Catholics, we don't agree on same issue most of the time. (Roman Catholic, Filipino, Officer)*

**Religious artefacts, icons and literature were largely kept in cabins, or pockets, or somewhere discreet. These things and the visible practice of religion were widely regarded as part of the private lives of seafarers and were not regarded as appropriate for 'public' consumption.**



*Well, you do it [religion] privately. Or I don't mind if you do it in the lounge but not during break time when others are using it. Maybe on Sunday. It depends, you can be as much of a Catholic or whatever you want to be but don't bother everybody else with it, I think that is the general impression really. Keep it to yourself. (Lutheran Church, Norwegian, Senior Officer)*

Some seafarers alluded to a sense of being free of community surveillance at sea, particularly when they were the only member of a particular nationality, or religion, on board. In this very particular sense, ships and working at sea seemed to offer seafarers a feeling of occupying spaces that were liminal and therefore permissive of behaviours that would be regarded as socially transgressive in their respective land-based communities. Whilst employed on board, **many seafarers engaged in activities which their religious communities ashore would disapprove of. They largely did this with a confidence that their particular ‘God’ would ‘understand’ their actions.**

*Once you are on board, people think differently. Say with food, whatever is prepared by the galley staff, you just eat it. We think that we are here to work and not to show everyone that we are Roman Catholics, or Muslims. No. We are here to earn money for our families. [...] You know, I worked with an Iranian seafarer, he was our fitter, he was the only Iranian on board and he was a Muslim but he was eating pork. So we asked him, ‘why are you eating pork?’ Then he told us that first, he was not an officer to demand this and that, and second, he was the only Iranian on board anyway so that was okay. But if they were two, he said, he would not eat pork [...] (Roman Catholic, Filipino, Rating)*

The needs of seafarers and the welfare work of staff, volunteers, and port-chaplains

**There are some parts of the world where port-chaplains and welfare workers are readily encountered by seafarers and others where they are scarcely found at all.**

*If your ship goes to ports in the UK, then there is a big chance that you will meet a chaplain regularly. But not in Asia or Middle East (Roman Catholic, Filipino, Rating)*

**Seafarers view chaplains as people who are available to talk and provide practical assistance to them. Often this relates to transport, free gifts, and the sale of sundry items including SIM card ‘top ups’**

*In Boston, there is a chaplain who always comes to visit us. He sells sim cards, phone credits and there had been times in the past when he would come with some free toiletries for us like toothpaste, soap, that kind of thing. (Roman Catholic, Filipino, Officer)*



**While most are aware of chaplains' religious and spiritual roles, they speak of them more generally as people to trust.**

*With chaplains, you feel like you have a friend in a foreign country and with seaman's club, I don't know, I feel safe when I am there. (Roman Catholic, Filipino, Motorman)*

When seafarers are faced with difficult problems on board they are often reluctant to address these through official channels either within their companies or during port-calls. **Seafarers often trust port chaplains with grievances concerning their shipboard living and working conditions in the hope that chaplains will be of assistance in resolving these.**

*Say, we have a problem... we don't feel comfortable reporting our concerns to the port state but with chaplains, we feel confident. So if the crew have problems and concerns with regard to their living and working conditions on board, they could always relay them to the chaplain. In a way, the trust is there. (Roman Catholicism, Filipino, Officer)*

**Some seafarers appreciated, and drew upon, the religious support and services that chaplains could offer.**

*When a chaplain came on board, I asked for a blessing because at that time my wife was about to give birth [...] Again, with my second child, I asked for blessing again and I asked the chaplain what he could do for my wife and he said, let us pray for her. (Roman Catholic, Filipino, Rating)*

**Volunteers, centre workers, and chaplains stressed that their role was focussed on the welfare of all seafarers not on promoting their own religion.**

*We're not going on ships to proselytise, we're not waving our bibles with one hand and a prayer book in the other. We go on board to find out if everybody's okay. If there's been any issues lately. We go on board and we find out somebody's lost their mother or their brother, or their wife has just had a baby and they can't get home to see this child. (Chaplain Canada)*

In the context of reduced funds from shipping companies, and with the voluntary sector facing a number of financial pressures, **the funding challenges faced by some chaplains and volunteers were considerable**. In many cases, chaplains and volunteers, were having to put more time into raising funds than they were able to put into the task of assisting seafarers. In some cases, they resorted to voluntary pay cuts and working beyond their paid hours to try to fulfil their responsibilities to seafarers.

*Our funding is... it's not sustainable at this point. We're working very hard to try to create ways to raise money. But it's getting to the point where it feels like we're all about the fundraising and not about the work. Which is when I start getting very angry with my board, and say to them, 'you guys need to remember that we do the work for which you raise the funds'.[...] So this year, we all had to take a 50 percent cut in pay. [...] I'm being paid half time but I'm certainly working well over my limit. [...] it's been a really tough year for us. (Chaplain Canada)*

**Chaplains and volunteers make themselves available to listen to seafarers' problems and to help out in times of emergency. This involves them in considerable emotional labour and opens them to feelings of frustration and disappointment when their efforts are not appreciated.**

*[...] you just feel like you went through all these hoops just to try to get to that ship and then you go on board and they're like "we don't need you". So yes, that kind of stuff is frustrating and sometimes it can make you be like "oh, why am I even doing this?" (Chaplain Canada)*

**Many chaplains and volunteers are women who may not be accepted in their roles by seafarers.**

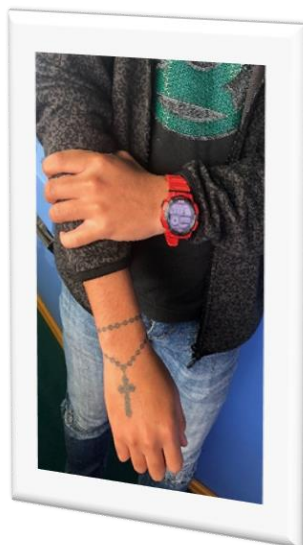
*I don't wear a collar when I go on board ships. For some people it's very disturbing to see a woman in a collar. I got... um... rather unceremoniously ejected from a ship once because they're talking to me and one guy says, "Wait – are you a pastor?" And I said "yes". "No, no, no, no, no, no" he says. "You have to go now. We don't do women pastors. My country, no women are pastors. You have to go right now." I said, "Really, where are you from?" He says "Croatia, we're Catholics. No women, no women." I said, "okay". He said, "You send us a man. No problem" (Chaplain Canada)*



## Religion and spirituality beyond formal religious settings

Thirty-seven of the seafarers interviewed and encountered on board were Roman Catholics from the Philippines. Amongst this group we uncovered a variety of beliefs. Many of these resonated with traditional Roman Catholic teachings, however, some did not. The idea of hell was not, for example, something which all seafarers believed in. **Within this group we identified the development of a working theology emphasising the role of God as 'protector'.**

*Yes, I believe that religious vows are of great help to ward off harm. It depends on one's faith. No one will force you to believe in those things. You have the freedom to decide for yourself. That's what I believe in. And you know what, it is really of great help because by the mercy of God, in many years of sailing, I have never encountered a single major accident (Roman Catholic, Filipino, Rating)*



Seafarers from the Philippines also revealed ways in which their beliefs combined basic Roman Catholic tenets with local superstitions embedded in traditional cultures and indigenous beliefs.

**Whilst serving on board seafarers abandoned many formal practices understood to signify piety ashore. They engaged in personal behaviours and practices that they would regard as prohibited ashore and when on shore-leave displayed little interest in making use of religious buildings or facilities for prayer or worship.**

*I go to bars or pubs for a round of drinks. I don't look for church. I also go to supermarkets. (Roman Catholicism, Filipino, Rating)*

## Key policy-related conclusions

- 1) In negotiating religious diversity in the context of confined living conditions and hazardous work, seafarers have collectively established a set of occupational norms which recognise the need to respect diverse religious and non-religious views on board whilst refraining from contentious discussions of differing values and beliefs. They therefore practice and advocate the private observance of religion on board and discourage its public discussion.
- 2) Port-based chaplains and volunteers play a critical role in supporting the welfare of seafarers on board and at times of crisis.
- 3) Seafarers' centres and ship visiting services are not encountered by seafarers in some parts of the world and are most frequently encountered in the UK and USA. There are therefore significant gaps in the port-based provision of welfare services.
- 4) The voluntary sector is facing challenges with regard to the funding of port-based welfare services for seafarers. This has resulted in the closure of some facilities, and it is causing many chaplains to divert their time and energy from engagement with seafarers to fundraising

## References

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