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The work of port chaplains: views from seafarers served

Wendy Cadge , Nelson Turgo , Sophie Gilliat-Ray , Helen Sampson ,
and Graeme Smith 

ABSTRACT

Seafarers have long interacted with religious figures in addition to the merchants, government officials, and members of the public they meet when ships come into port. Today these religious figures are primarily Christian chaplains who provide material and spiritual assistance in ports around the globe. This article extends research about the interactions between port chaplains and seafarers by asking—for the first time—how seafarers experience port chaplains. Drawing on lived religion approaches to the study of religion, it is clear that, while most seafarers rely on port chaplains for practical assistance, a significant minority experience them as religious figures who can be trusted, offer blessings, and quietly remind them of God. The lived religion lens reveals aspects of seafarers' spiritual and religious agency which are frequently overlooked because they take place quietly in the interstices of their work.

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Introduction

More than 1.6 million seafarers work on container and ocean-going cargo ships in seas around the globe (ICS 2020). As they move raw materials and finished products between countries, their work is core to the global economy. The majority of the seafarers are men from the Philippines, China, and Indonesia. They typically work on nine- to twelve-month contracts thousands of miles from home (Sampson 2013). The work is physically taxing, repeated, lonely, and dangerous due to weather and threats of piracy. Financially, seafarers support families and loved ones from afar while identifying the central challenges of the work as loneliness, isolation, and physical danger (Jezewska and Iversen 2012; Sampson et al. 2018; Sampson and Acejo 2016; Abilia and Tang 2014).

While seafarers spend most of their working time at sea, they have long interacted with religious leaders alongside the government officials and

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others they meet when their ships come into port (Trivellato, Halevi, and Antunes 2014, 2–23). From traveling preachers to religiously motivated social service providers, religious figures have often been present for seafarers at the water's edge (Kverndal 1986, 2008). Christian ministry to seafarers has a long history in the United Kingdom and the United States as clergy historically sought out seafarers as targets for evangelism (Kverndal 1994, 3). From the Bethel Church movement to religiously operated inns and boarding houses for seafarers and today's port chaplains who negotiate security protocols to come on board ships, religious figures and seafarers have long histories of interaction (Cadge and Skaggs 2018a; Tuckerman 1812).

Religious studies scholars have documented interactions between seafarers and religious leaders from the perspective of the religious leaders (Deems 1978; Frank 1977; Knickerbocker 2014; Kverndal 1986; Hovde 1994). Less is known about the experiences of seafarers, how they view and respond to religious leaders, and what role—if any—these interactions play regarding their personal sense of spirituality and religion. As preachers transitioned to port chaplains and the religious demographics of seafarers diversified, questions about the way religiously diverse seafarers engage with largely Christian port chaplains also offer insights into the way religious pluralism is negotiated in daily interactions and whether seafarers see port chaplains as religious figures or primarily as social service providers (Cadge and Skaggs 2018a).

This article combines insights from lived religion approaches to the study of religion and from recent scholarship about religion 'on the edge'—a part of contemporary life outside congregations and traditional gathering places (Bender et al. 2013; Hall 1997; Knibbe and Kupari 2020; McGuire 2008). Lived religion approaches, as David Hall synthesized in his edited volume of 1997, focus on the everyday ways people practise their religions, with an eye on the historical and sociological contexts that shape them. Weaving together analytic streams in history, congregational studies, and ethnographic approaches to daily religious life, the emphasis on lived religion prioritizes the experiences and practices of individuals in their everyday religious and spiritual lives (Ammerman 2016; Hall 1997; McGuire 2008; Orsi 2003; Williams 2010). As Kim Knibbe and Helena Kupari argue in the introduction to a recent symposium on the subject,

The lived religion approach abandons such macro-level questions and attempts at theorizing the future of religion in modernity by focusing on how religion is practised ... it enquires into how religion is encountered and experienced—how it comes into place—in different environments. (Knibbe and Kupari 2020, 159)

We focus on lived religion in a setting 'on the edge', as described in Courtney Bender et al.'s edited volume of the same title. Aiming to "de-center[s] taken-for-granted categories in the sociology of religion and, by doing so, re-center[s]

some of its central tenets”, the authors call on scholars to consider religion beyond its shape in congregations and outside the British, European, and American contexts (Bender et al. 2013, 1). This includes focusing on settings on the edges of non-religious institutions, where religious practices may not be immediately visible.

We bring together insights in approaches to lived religion and religion ‘on the edge’ in this article to ask how seafarers interact with and experience port chaplains today. In more classic sociological terms, we consider how seafarers exercise agency—religious and otherwise—within the structural constraints of life on board. While port chaplains describe their work largely in terms of the relationships they develop with seafarers and the kinds of practical and existential support they offer, this article centers the voices and agency of the seafarers themselves. Drawing on interviews with 55 seafarers on 2 merchant ships—a bulk carrier and an LNG (Liquefied Natural Gas) tanker—at sea and fieldwork in two ports in the United Kingdom, we find that most seafarers rely on port chaplains for practical assistance. A significant minority also experience them as religious figures who can be trusted, offer blessings, and quietly remind them of God. The lived religion lens reveals aspects of seafarers’ spiritual and religious agency which are frequently overlooked because they take place quietly in the interstices of their work. It also extends the work of Francesca Montemaggi and colleagues which focuses primarily on the way Catholic chaplains interact with seafarers through the Catholic organization “Apostle Ship of the Sea in the UK” or AoS (Montemaggi 2018; Montemaggi, Bullivant, and Glackin 2018).

Background

A growing body of research explores how religion and spirituality are present outside the settings where scholars traditionally look. In the past 20 years, scholars have used the concept of lived religion to consider how and where religion is present and practised in people’s daily lives in a wide range of time periods and geographies (Ammerman 2007, 2020; Hall 1997; McGuire 2008). A recent symposium in the *Journal of Contemporary Religion* explored ways of further theorizing the lived religion approach by explicating what is meant by the concept of religion, tying it more closely to other theoretical and epistemological approaches and considering how these approaches and the emphasis on practice anchor the ‘doing’ of research (Knibbe and Kupari 2020).

This article extends these efforts by more explicitly bringing Bender et al.’s approach to religion ‘on the edge’ into the conversation. While scholars of lived religion tend to follow individuals across the settings where they live their lives, Bender et al. pay attention to the way institutions structure and shape such experiences. By looking at religion in hospitals, airports, prisons,

and other seemingly secular settings, scholars utilizing this approach provide analytic insights into the way religion is lived and shaped by the institutions within which it takes places (Bender et al. 2013; Cadge 2012; Dubler 2013; Stahl 2017). “We argue”, Bender et al. write, “for looking ‘beyond’ the congregation as a way to open up sociological approaches to the organization, scope, and development of religion in society” (2013, 8). In so doing, they frequently show how religion is “hidden in plain sight” in the interstices of a range of secular and religious organizations (Cadge and Konieczny 2014).

This article focuses on merchant ships and ports as a set of workplaces about which very little is known regarding people’s lived religious experience. Scholarship about religion in professional work environments is less relevant in these settings (Miller 2007; Miller and Ewest 2013) which are more similar to industrial workplaces (Callahan 2009). Religious professionals—primarily chaplains—worked in industrial settings in the United States and the United Kingdom (Andersen 1980; Bell 2006; Johnston and McFarland 2010; Michelson 2006). Priests, often called worker-priests, were also closely aligned with trade unions, especially in the 1960s (Arnal 1986; Fisher 2009; Heideman 1967; MacNair 1963). In these settings, chaplains frequently balanced tensions between workers and management as their presence relied on permission from management, yet it was management and organizational practices they sought to transform (Bell 2006).

We shift focus from chaplains to seafarers in this article, who work on merchant ships and spend most of their work time at sea. From fishing to trade and industrial work, seafaring has been central to local and global economic activity for thousands of years (Alderton et al. 2004). As commercial vessels began to be ‘flagged out’ or registered in countries owners deemed most beneficial for financial and regulatory reasons in the twentieth century, labor markets opened and national labor protections available to seafarers declined (Bloor and Sampson 2009; DeSombre 2006; Lane 1999; Lane et al. 2002; Leong 2012; Sampson 2013). The composition of crews on merchant vessels shifted (Ellis and Sampson 2008; Sampson 2013; Sampson and Schroeder 2006). Today seafarers are mostly hired by third parties and are composed of multi-national crews, typically ranging from 6 to 25 people, mostly men (Sampson 2013, 41–46).

Religious leaders have long offered services for local seafarers in their ports. In the United States, organizations like the New York-based “American Seamen’s Friend Society”, founded in 1828, aimed to “to improve the social and moral condition of Seamen, by uniting the efforts of the wise and good in their behalf”, including teaching them the gospel. Many of these efforts were by Protestants, although Catholics also offered support through “Apostleship of the Sea” which offered pastoral and practical support to seafarers as it developed over time (Kverndal 1986, 402; Yzermans 1995).

With the advent of containers and 24-hour port operations, the time ships spent in ports radically decreased, leaving seafarers less time on shore (Levinson 2006). Some religious social service organizations historically operated inns where seafarers stayed overnight when their ships were in port. With containers came quicker turn-around times and less need for overnight accommodation. Religious social service organizations shifted, sending more people as port chaplains on board. This became more of a necessity for port chaplains, particularly after 9/11, with new security requirements in ports that inhibited movement between ship and shore. Today most chaplains serve seafarers either on board their vessels or in seafarer centers that offer internet connection, snacks, and a place to relax for a few hours on shore. They sell phone cards and drive seafarers to local malls, tacking back and forth between economic and religious, moral, and advocacy roles (Cadge and Skaggs 2018b, 94). To date there has been no exploration of the ways seafarers today experience this support and what connection it has, if any, to their spiritual and religious experiences and agency on board vessels at sea.

Research methods

The data analyzed in the article come from a three-year project, “Religion in Multi-Ethnic Contexts: A Multidisciplinary Case Study of Global Seafaring”, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, which focused on the way multi-national groups of seafarers live and work together, engaging (or not) across their differences. This included attention to the way religion and spirituality are present in these interactions and how seafarers engage with chaplains, if at all, on board or in ports. One member of the research team (Nelson Turgo) conducted non-participant observation and interviews on two vessels for a total of 89 days and took detailed fieldnotes. One ship was owned and operated by an established South East Asian company while the second was owned in China and operated by a ship management company with central offices elsewhere.

Both ships were staffed by multi-national crews. We explicitly sought out ships that included seafarers from a range of religious backgrounds. We also needed to find vessels which did not go into high-risk areas (which the researcher was prohibited from traveling on by the companies and the university ethics committee). Negotiating such access is challenging, as described elsewhere (Sampson and Turgo 2018). Most seafarers in the international fleet are Filipino and Chinese (ICS 2020) and these two major groups are supplemented by Indians, Europeans (who are most frequently officers), and a variety of other nationals. The vessels we focus on were staffed by American, Chinese, Latvian, Sri Lankan, Swedish, Norwegian, and Filipino seafarers. Once on board a vessel, the researcher negotiated access with individual seafarers stressing the voluntary nature of participation. All

seafarers, except one, took part in interviews in private spaces on the vessels. Interviews were conducted in Filipino with Filipino seafarers and English with the rest of the crew. The demographics of all 55 respondents are described in Table 1.

The researcher who traveled on board the two vessels was a male postdoctoral research associate who grew up in the Philippines and received his PhD in the social sciences in the UK. He is multi-lingual and familiar with a range of religious traditions and practices in the Philippines. He also conducted participant observation at two seafarer centers in the UK, one run by a major faith-based organization and the other independent. He spent six months in the areas served by these centers observing in the centers, talking with seafarers in port, and accompanying workers, chaplains, and volunteers on ship visits. He conducted both formal and informal interviews in these contexts, which are integrated into this analysis. He sometimes went on board ships with chaplains and other times engaged with seafarers without chaplains present in an effort to solicit broad, unbiased, perspectives about the way seafarers engage (or not) with chaplains. He also met with seafarers at seafarer centers when chaplains were not around. The research team—which included three other sociologists (Wendy Cadge, Sophie Gilliat-Ray, and Helen Sampson) and a theologian (Graeme Smith)—also conducted interviews with port chaplains and key stakeholders globally, which are not included in this article.

Data were recorded, transcribed, and, where applicable, translated into English by a member of the research team and coded for key themes. For the purpose of this article, researchers first read all of the interviews and fieldnotes. They then identified every instance the word ‘chaplain’ was

Table 1. Demographics of seafarers from ships 1 and 2 (N = 55).

	N (percent*/average)
Gender	
Male	55 (100)
Ethnicity	
American	1 (2)
Chinese	4 (9)
Filipino	43 (76)
Latvian	1 (2)
Norwegian	3 (5)
Sri Lankan	2 (4)
Swedish	1 (2)
Age	
average (standard deviation)	55 (39 +/- 11)
Religion	
Atheist	6 (11)
Buddhist	2 (4)
Jehovah's Witness	1 (2)
Catholic	37 (67)
Protestant**	9 (16)

*Percents may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

**'Protestant' includes Baptist, Iglesia Filipina Independiente, Jesus is Lord Church, Lutheran, and Potter's House.

mentioned in an interview or in fieldnotes or chaplains were present with seafarers or talked about by seafarers. The researchers created sub-codes focused on the content and structure of these mentions, which they refined through subsequent coding and analysis. This article focuses only on the way seafarers see and talk about chaplains, leaving questions about the way chaplains see their own work for other analyses. Much of this conversation took place in interviews in response to questions about seamen's clubs and what the clubs and chaplains who staff them do and could do to serve seafarers best.

Findings and discussion

Following lived religion approaches to the study of religion, we focus on practices, including conversation related to chaplains among the seafarers studied. Almost all of the seafarers we met in the course of this research had contact with chaplains either on board their vessels or in the centers where chaplains hold offices when they are in the ports. In the words of one seafarer, "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 [the] Middle East." (Personal interview, 15 July 2018) It is the captain who is ultimately responsible for deciding if a chaplain (or anyone else) can come on board the vessel when the ship docks. Seafarers who have time off while in the port, and have the necessary paperwork, also disembark and chaplains frequently assist them with transportation and other local amenities. Much as seafarers work at the water's edge, chaplains are quietly at the edges of the work seafarers do.

Practical assistance through trusting relationships

Seafarers primarily talk about chaplains as people who are available to talk and who provide practical assistance, selling SIM cards for communication and assisting with transportation. While most are aware of chaplains' religious and spiritual roles, they speak of them more generally as people to trust and people who keep them in mind. "With chaplains", one explained, "you feel like you have a friend in a foreign country and, with [the] seamen's club, I don't know, I feel safe when I am there." (Personal interview, 7 July 2018)

In the words of another,

I think when you came from a very long voyage and you can't go ashore for some reasons, seeing a chaplain is a good thing. He might have something for you, maybe [a] top-up [voucher for the mobile phone], or just being able to talk to somebody not from the ship is a relief enough. Imagine being at sea for weeks, sometimes for two months, what you always want is to see other people, being able to talk to others, listen to your stories or maybe ask you about your family, that's what chaplains do. (Personal interview, 17 July 2018)

Seafarers described chaplains as “connections to the outside world”, a “reassuring presence”, and those to “trust” while in port.

The practical assistance chaplains provide takes many forms and is the basis on which seafarers get to know chaplains. “In Boston, there is a chaplain who always comes to visit us”, one seafarer explained.

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... There are also instances when he brings with him free vitamins, medicine for cough, sore throat. (Personal interview, 20 July 2018)

Such free items were mentioned—and appreciated—by several other seafarers when talking about their interactions with chaplains. An electrician said, “There were times that they would offer so many freebies like free juice, tea, coffee, biscuits. They would also give us free sweaters and hats during winter.” (Personal interview, 18 August 2017)

Seafarers mostly recognize and value the visits and free gifts port chaplains bring. They also spoke a lot about the ways chaplains help them with communication and transportation. In the words of one,

And they [chaplains] sell local SIM cards with phone credits cheaper compared to stores ashore. I remember I bought a SIM card with data from him for US\$20.00. Then another seafarer bought the same SIM card with the same amount of data for US\$50.00 from a local store. So he is really very helpful. (Personal interview, 20 July 2018)

Some seafarers mentioned that they already had the ability to make calls on their phone, however, thus rendering this chaplaincy service an outdated practice:

Now, most ships have internet, have Wi-Fi, so if you have internet on board, and the chaplain comes on board selling local SIM [cards], seafarers don’t need it any more. That’s what I think. (Personal interview, 16 July 2018)

On a ship visit in the UK, the researcher worked with the chaplain selling top-up vouchers, while simultaneously engaging seafarers in conversation about life on board, life at home, etc. In one case, the researcher and the chaplain got to a ship too late to go on board and sold a SIM card from land, which they put in a plastic bag the seafarer lowered from the ship with the money so he could receive it.

Seafarers also spoke at length about the free transportation to malls, tourist spots or the seafarers’ center chaplains provide at the edges of multiple organizations:

I think seamen’s clubs are still very important to seafarers especially when they offer free rides to us. That is a big help to us. When they bring us to the nearest mall or to the seamen’s club for a drink or two, that is very much appreciated. (Personal interview, 20 July 2018)

As one explained,

I think they [chaplains] should continue providing free transport to seafarers and, if there is none, they should find ways to provide one. You know, that is one big problem of seafarers when they go on shore leave. Taxi drivers are taking advantage of seafarers so chaplains should be able to help us in that respect. (Fieldnotes, port visit 2019)

Threaded throughout conversations about SIM cards and transportation assistance are comments from seafarers about the trust chaplains engender and help they provide to them as strangers in new countries when their ships dock.

This trust in port chaplains extends to seafarers having them serve as personal shoppers in some ports. On board a vessel in the UK, the researcher watched the chaplain deliver parcels to a seafarer who had asked him to purchase some goods for him. “He always helps us”, the seafarer said. “He is our shopper”, said another while the chaplain smiled widely. (Fieldnotes, port visit 2018) On board another vessel, the same chaplain delivered an electronic gadget to a crew member that someone in the center’s volunteer network had arranged to purchase for the seafarer. Arrangements are typically made in advance for payment, which is not difficult as seafarers also rely on chaplains to help them send money home.

Through and alongside this practical assistance, seafarers describe chaplains as people who listen and support them. “I think many seafarers need that, somebody who will listen and won’t laugh at them”, a motorman explained. “We need people who will provide a listening ear.” (Personal interview, 10 July 2018) They tend to seek out chaplains for help with specific problems. One explained,

Say, we have a problem, we don’t feel comfortable reporting our concerns to the port state [control], 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. (Personal interview, 17 July 2018)

The researcher observed this trust which included brokering power relationships when visiting another ship with the chaplain in the UK. The Filipino seafarers on board told the chaplain they could not buy top-up vouchers because their Russian captain had refused to give them a cash advance for two months in a row. They were promised that in their next port they would be given their cash advance. The chaplain thought through his options and then gave the seafarers, for no charge, four US\$30.00 top-up vouchers. “Share the data amongst yourselves to connect with your families so they know you are ok”, he said, leaving his business card and telling them to send him a message on Facebook from their next port and to let him know if the captain made good on his promise. If the captain did not, he

said, he would inform the port chaplain in that next port who could connect the seafarers to the Seafarers' Trust (ITF) which supports and advocates for seafarers worldwide. In these and other examples, seafarers saw chaplains as people with whom to talk, who help them practically, and from whom they can request assistance when needed.

Spiritual support

Alongside the practical support, some seafarers spoke about the religious aspects of the chaplains' role. These mentions were fewer and further between than conversations about SIM cards and transportation but were, nevertheless, there around the edges. Mass was mentioned by some Catholic seafarers, although Mass rarely took place on board because of security regulations and limited time in ports. One seafarer described his experience with Mass, saying,

Yes, it was my first Mass in a seamen's club, though I attended two Masses already on board. But that was many years ago. Nowadays, Mass on board is hard to come by. You don't get it unless you ask the captain and the captain will then arrange it with the chaplain in the seamen's club. And I think port authorities have made it difficult for chaplains to hold Mass on board, with all these port securities, you know. (Personal interview, 17 July 2018)

Seafarers who spoke of Mass could usually remember where it had been and who had led it as well as the captain of the vessel. "Our captain on that ship where we had Mass was very religious. He was praying the rosary every night." (Personal interview, 8 April 2017) Another seafarer remembered a Mass he had attended in Rotterdam where he had played the role of an altar boy, "because I used to be one in my younger years back home. The priest was wearing a cassock." (Personal interview, 6 July 2018) When Mass happened, seafarers seemed to remember it.

A number of seafarers noted that it was most important to have Mass after a dangerous event on board. In the words of one,

Yes, one time [we had Mass], remember when our ship encountered this menacing storm and we thought we would all die? When the chaplain came on board, the captain asked if he could say a Mass, which he did. So that was my first and last Mass on board. I have never had any other Mass on board ever since. (Personal interview, 24 July 2018)

It is the captain who decides whether Mass is permitted on board, which leads to real or perceived entanglements. In response to a question about on-board Mass one seafarer said,

That's what I have wanted all along. However, our captain is Chinese and Chinese are Communists. They don't believe in those things. They don't believe in religion, in God. I really would want to have Mass on board because there has been a

succession of accidents. Then we have seafarers falling ill, like having a boil, then we had accidents. First, there was chief cook followed by the bosun; there was a piece of metal which fell on his foot. (Personal interview, 27 April 2017)

Whether Mass took place depended not only on the availability of a priest to offer it, seafarers said, but also on what they perceived to be the orientation of the captain around questions of spirituality and religion—a topic on which chaplains rarely had any influence.

Blessings were another frequent way seafarers experienced chaplains as religious figures. Occasionally, a Mass included a blessing for the ship. As one seafarer explained, “We had a Mass on board and he [the chaplain] blessed our religious icons and many parts of the ship. Other seafarers also asked that their cabins be blessed.” (Personal interview, 16 July 2018) More often seafarers received individual blessings from chaplains. “When a chaplain came on board, I asked for a blessing because at that time my wife was about to give birth and she always found it difficult”, one explained. “Again, with my second child, I asked for a blessing again and I asked the chaplain what he could do for my wife and he said, ‘Let us pray for her.’” (Personal interview, 2 September 2017) Other seafarers described chaplains blessing them:

I was on duty in the gangway and there was a chaplain who came on board and he spent some time reading some passages from the Bible and then he blessed us. I think that was wonderful. I felt really invigorated after that. (Personal interview, 25 April 2017)

Seafarers also spoke about chaplains asking if they wanted them to carry prayer intentions back to their chapels or if they wanted free Christian reading materials. A seafarer remembered being in Europe when a chaplain

came on board and told us that they hold a regular Mass in their mission’s chapel and if we can’t attend, then they are accepting prayer intentions. They will include them in the Mass. We all wrote down what we wanted. I asked that I could be able to go home without any delay. That’s what they do. They are really nice people. (Personal interview, 25 April 2017)

Many seafarers spoke about reading materials—mostly Bibles and devotionals materials published as *Our Daily Bread*. “He [a chaplain]”, one seafarer remembered, “stayed for some 30 minutes and then left us with some religious materials and some copies of the Bible.” (Personal interview, 5 April 2017) Seafarers recognized that these items are Christian: “I think it is very rare to see people from seamen centers giving out reading materials for other religions. Mostly they are for Catholics, Christians.” (Fieldnotes, port visit 2019)

While seafarers primarily engage with chaplains for practical support, some do see and value their spiritual or religious roles. “The presence of chaplains on

board reminds seafarers of the need to communicate with God regularly”, one explained, saying that chaplains make seafarers “conscious of our obligations to God” (personal interview, 24 July 2018). Seafarers are often busy with their work, others commented, also seeing chaplains as a “good reminder of God, of not forgetting God because sometimes we forget God” (personal interview, 6 July 2018). While a minority of the seafarers we interviewed see chaplains as a reminder of God, some do and find support in it. In the words of one,

I accept all the challenges that my work entails and my religion helps me. I really feel that my faith in God strengthens me in the work that I do. I ask for a rewarding job, that I be safe and the same thing with my family. I leave it all to God. I can't speak for everyone but whether I am well or not, I know that God will take care of me. In ports, there are chaplains to care for us. (Fieldnotes, port visit 2018)

These examples, viewed from a lived religious perspective, demonstrate how religion and spirituality are present for some seafarers out of sight, outside traditional congregational settings, far from home.

Points of tension

Seafarers named several challenges or points of tensions they faced in their interactions with chaplains: the limited time they have to see chaplains, language differences, some tensions about the role of the chaplain, and the belief some seafarers have that the chaplains' work is dated and no longer needed. Most seafarers have very limited time when ships are in ports and usually do not know if or when a chaplain will visit. Many are working when chaplains do come by and say more coordination is needed for them to have time to take advantage of the resources chaplains offer.

Language is a barrier. While English is the language of the sea (James et al. 2018; Kataria 2015), seafarers have varying degrees of English language fluency and chaplains do not usually speak the native languages of seafarers. The researcher interviewed many seafarers from the Philippines in their native languages and issues around English often came up. “One time”, a seafarer said, who had a chat with a chaplain. “I think it was in Korea. We talked about my family, my work on board. He asked me, ‘How is life?’ I said, ‘Okay, Sir.’ And I said, ‘Not many questions, Sir, because my English is not very good.’” Others described conversations with chaplains, saying things like “they are short” and “I don't want to say more because it is in English (laughing).” (Personal interview, 8 July 2018)

In addition to limited time/coordination and language issues, some seafarers named tensions and ambiguities in the roles of chaplains that presented other challenges. Some seafarers were simply unsure about what chaplains do and how they could be of help. One seafarer suggested that chaplains make clearer what they have to offer when they come on board:

I think when chaplains come on board, they should make it clear to the crew that they are not just selling SIM cards and giving away religious materials; they should also make it clear that they are there to listen to the problems of seafarers or maybe just there to listen, not necessarily provide solutions. I think that's a good way of making their presence felt. Some seafarers, especially when they are young, they need people to listen to them, so maybe chaplains could do that. (Personal interview, 15 July 2018)

Other seafarers assume chaplains are only for people who are religious. As one explained, "I am not so religious; why should I waste his [the chaplain's] time?" (Fieldnotes, port visit 2019) Some chaplains are primarily interested in talking about religion, which puts some seafarers off. One seafarer remembered a chaplain who

came on board and talked to us. He asked us questions like ... how do you talk to God? Where do you talk to him? Through the Bible? After the conversation, he would give his advice. He also gave us free literature, similar to the Bible. Many things were written there, like 'Are you free from sin?' (Personal interview, 27 April 2017)

While all but one said that Christian beliefs were never pushed on them, several were concerned about the lack of resources and support for non-Christian seafarers.

Finally, a few seafarers see the work of chaplains as dated and no longer needed. "I would like to tell you again that chaplains are very nice", one said, "but I feel so sorry for them because they come on board ... hardly anyone pays attention to them." (Fieldnotes, port visit 2018) While most seafarers seem to value the human contact chaplains bring, there are some that do not. "I think many seafarers, if they have free time, would rather stay in their cabin and rest than, say, talk to a visiting chaplain", one explained. (Personal interview, 8 July 2018) A few mentioned the declining power of religion, saying "the church itself is losing power ... not only with the seafarers, it is all together" (personal interview, 26 July 2018).

Conclusions

Seafarers have long engaged with religious figures when in port. Religious leaders teaching and evangelizing in earlier centuries have been replaced in recent years by port chaplains who provide practical support, a friendly ear, and—for a minority of chaplains—a reminder of God. While the practical assistance with transportation, communication, and assistance from seafarer centers is hard to miss, their spiritual and religious roles can be overlooked because of the way seafarers experience them: quietly, often out of view. These examples, not frequently mentioned in studies of lived religion, illustrate the range of ways people engage with religious figures and how some also practise their religions privately.

Combining insights from lived religion approaches and current conversations about religion 'on the edge' shines light on the role of Mass, blessings, prayer

intentions, and reminders of God that some seafarers experience through their work with chaplains on the water and at the water's edge. We see seafarers exercising agency in these moments, connected to religious experiences that are meaningful to them outside the structural conditions in which they find themselves on board. While almost all seafarers talk about the transportation help chaplains provide, a small but significant minority recognize the religious dimension of this work and experience some spiritual connection through it. The presence of religion—in the figure of port chaplains—and the influence it has on seafarers add a new dimension to studies of the way workers exercise agency around religion in industrial workplaces. Because these chaplains have no organizational relationships to seafarers or their employers, they often avoid tensions between workers and management as evident historically and have the potential to intervene on behalf of workers as needed, particularly around issues of pay, safety, and basic rights (Arnal 1986; Fisher 2009; Heideman 1967; MacNair 1963).

Unlike chaplains in other sectors, port chaplains are not financially supported by the institutions they serve. This may expand the ways in which seafarers engage with chaplains as both seafarers and chaplains have considerable latitude in what the work consists of and what interactions it includes. This also has the potential to expand the power chaplains have as they are not beholden to the same institutions that employ the seafarers. This article shows that seafarers exercise agency in these interactions, seeking practical support and, in some cases, engaging with aspects of their religious and spiritual backgrounds and experiences.

This article shows how religion is present at the edges of non-religious organizations and significant in the lives of some seafarers through their interactions with port chaplains. While seafarers are central to the global economy, their work takes place largely away from the public eye and few scholars have considered their lived religious experiences. This article extends research about the interactions between port chaplains and seafarers by showing how seafarers exercise agency in their experiences with port chaplains. Drawing on lived religion approaches to the study of religion, it is clear that, while most seafarers rely on port chaplains for practical assistance, a significant minority also experience them as religious figures who can be trusted, offer blessings, and quietly remind them of God. The lived religion lens reveals aspects of seafarers' spiritual and religious experiences which are frequently overlooked because they take place quietly, in the interstices of their work.

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