Methodism in the Royal Navy, 1740–1815

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Abstract

The relationship between Methodism and the armed forces dates from the very early days of the movement. The Methodist soldier preachers of the eighteenth century have been the subject of considerable historical study; the navy has received much less attention. Owen Spencer Watkins recognized that evidence of Methodism in the Royal Navy 'was at most very occasional. The result is that a most interesting chapter in the history of our Church is lost to us.'[1] There is a paucity of material, certainly in comparison with the army; however, it is possible to give sufficient evidence of a thriving Methodist subculture in the Royal Navy during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars.

Keywords: Methodism, Royal Navy, sailors, Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars

The presence of Methodism amongst British soldiers during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries has received much attention, whereas Methodist influence in the Royal Navy has hitherto been largely neglected. John Haime and other Methodist soldiers are frequently referred to in Methodist historiography. John Wesley wrote a number of letters to Haime and spoke with pride of the bravery and steadfast faith that Methodist soldiers had shown at the Battle of Fontenoy in 1745.[2] Michael Snape has described the extensive, 'forgotten', Methodist subculture that developed in the British Army, and which was manifest

[1] Owen Spencer Watkins, *Soldiers and Preachers Too: Being the Romantic Story of Methodism in the British Army* (London: C. H. Kelly, 1906), 50.

[2] Wesley to the Major of Newcastle-upon-Tyne (26 October 1745), *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, ed. John Telford, 8 vols (London: Epworth Press, 1931), II:53.

on campaigns from Flanders in the 1740s to Waterloo.[3] The importance of soldiers in the overseas expansion of the movement, especially throughout the British Empire, has been acknowledged by David Hempton.[4] John Lenton examined the records of every preacher who entered the Methodist itinerancy before 1791; this study included several former soldiers.[5] These 'soldier preachers' are well known within Methodist history; there appear to be no comparable named sailors during the early years of the movement. Yet a detailed analysis of the (albeit at times sketchy) evidence leads to the conclusion that there was also a small, but very significant, presence of Methodist sailors in the Royal Navy, especially during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars of 1793 to 1815. The existence of Methodism in the navy has been acknowledged by historians in their chronicling of wider evangelicalism in the fleet, or briefly referred to in broader analyses of Britain's navy during this period.[6]

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[3] Michael Snape, *The Redcoat and Religion: The Forgotten History of the British Soldier from the Age of Marlborough to the Eve of The First World War* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), 7–68.

[4] David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (London: Yale University Press, 2005), 20.

[5] John Lenton, *John Wesley's Preachers: A Social and Statistical Analysis of the British and Irish Preachers Who Entered the Methodist Itinerancy before 1791* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2009), 52.

[6] Gareth Atkins, 'Christian Heroes, Providence, and Patriotism in Wartime Britain, 1793–1815', *The Historical Journal*, 58/2 (June 2015), 393–414; Richard Blake, *Evangelicals in the Royal Navy, 1775–1815: Blue Lights and Psalm Singers* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2008); Denver Brunsman, *The Evil Necessity: British Naval Impressment in the Eighteenth-Century World* (London: University of Virginia Press, 2013), 85–6; Christopher P. Magra,

To describe the close, enduring, but at times ambiguous, relationship between Methodism and the armed forces, it is necessary to begin with John Wesley himself. Wesley's attitudes were full of apparent contradictions: on the one hand, Wesley saw soldiers and sailors as souls ripe for salvation; on the other hand, he was repelled by their moral standards.[7] References to Wesley and other early Methodists addressing soldiers, usually with positive results, are frequent. Societies flourished amongst soldiers, both on campaign and at garrison towns. Soldiers protected Wesley from hostile crowds, especially in Ireland, and they were, not infrequently, good and diligent listeners to his sermons.[8]

Wesley's views on sailors, though expressed far less often than those about soldiers, were condemnatory. His father Samuel's brief sojourn as a naval chaplain appears to have had no impact on John Wesley.[9] In 1736, he had been surprised that even a hurricane which befell his ship whilst en route to Georgia appeared not to have turned the crew to the Almighty.[10] He later asked the question of the Royal Navy: 'Is not every man of war a floating hell? Where is found more consummate wickedness, a more full, damning contempt

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'Faith at Sea: Exploring Maritime Religiosity in the Eighteenth Century', *International Journal of Maritime History*, 19/1 (2007), 87–106.

[7] *Journal and Diaries IV (1755–1765)* [vol. XXI of *The Works of John Wesley*], ed. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 166.

[8] *Journal and Diaries III (1743–1754)* [vol. XX of *The Works of John Wesley*], ed. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 342–3.

[9] Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism*, 3rd edn (London: Epworth Press, 2002), 47.

[10] *Journal and Diaries I (1735–1738)* [vol. XVIII of *The Works of John Wesley*], ed. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988), 44.

of God and all the laws, except in the bottomless pit.'[11] The crews of some privateers were amongst the most active members of a very hostile mob that Wesley encountered at Falmouth in 1745.[12] This incident stands out as being one of the very few encounters with sailors that he described. When Charles Wesley preached outdoors at Plymouth, in June 1746, he, too, was confronted by a large crowd of soldiers and sailors who were shouting and blaspheming.[13] In September 1749, Edward Perronet, a close associate of the Wesleys, had his sermon at Whitehaven disrupted by a party of sailors playing the violin.[14] George Whitefield had considerable contact with sailors, his 'blue-jacketed parishioners', albeit mainly merchant mariners, during the three years he spent at sea.[15] They did not appear susceptible to his evangelical message. In 1739, after crossing the Atlantic, he confessed: 'I cannot say any remarkable conversions have been wrought on board.'[16] It is hard to find either a named sailor, or reference to a society of sailors, in Wesley's journal, letters, or sermons; indeed, there is scant evidence of Wesley preaching to sailors. In 1756, he preached at Pill, near Bristol, to a 'large attentive congregation' many of whom were sailors.[17] At

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[11] Watkins, *Soldiers and Preachers Too*, 7.

[12] Wesley, *Journal and Diaries III*, ed. Ward and Heitzenrater, XX:144.

[13] *The Manuscript Journal of the Reverend Charles Wesley, M.A.*, ed. S T Kimbrough, Jr and Kenneth G. C. Newport, 2 vols (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2008), II:462.

[14] Stuart Andrews, *Methodism and Society* (London: Longman, 1970), 40.

[15] Robert Philip, *The Life and Times of The Reverend George Whitefield, M.A.* (London, George Virtue, 1837), 67.

[16] Stephen Berry, 'Whitefield and the Atlantic', in Geordan Hammond and David Ceri Jones, eds, *George Whitefield: Life, Context, and Legacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 219.

[17] Wesley, *Journal and Diaries IV*, ed. Ward and Heitzenrater, XXI:44.

Dover in 1768, Wesley recorded: 'What a desire to hear runs through all the seaport towns whenever we come! Surely God is besieging this nation and attacking it at all the entrances.'[18] It is significant that he referred to ports other than Dover. Wesley visited Falmouth, Plymouth, and Portsmouth many times but there are no records of him preaching to audiences made up mainly of sailors.

Hempton stated that Methodism 'thrived on the margins of traditional hierarchies of class, gender, race and age'.[19] Sailors' occupation and lifestyles placed them on the boundaries and margins of British society. Both the army and the navy recruited from those regarded as the dregs of eighteenth century society. N. A. M. Rodger's study of the Georgian navy stated that: 'seamen have always dwelt on the fringes of settled society'.[20] Sailors were, even more so than soldiers, outsiders.[21] Richard Blake compared Methodism in the navy to that described in Snape's study of the army.[22] Sailors generally had far fewer opportunities to interact with civilians apart from periods spent in port. Although merchant mariners spent time ashore, frequently alternating between nautical and land-based employment, this was not the case for seamen in the Royal Navy. Sailors were almost a race apart, distanced from wider society by their appearance, dress, habits, and language in a way that did not apply to

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[18] *Journal and Diaries V (1765–1775)* [vol. XXII of *The Works of John Wesley*], ed. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 165.

[19] Hempton, *Methodism*, 131.

[20] N. A. M. Rodger, *The Wooden World: An Anatomy of the Georgian Navy* (London: Fontana, 1988), 5.

[21] Richard P. Heitzenrater, 'The Poor and the People Called Methodists', in Richard P. Heitzenrater, ed. *The Poor and the People Called Methodists, 1729–1999* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 25–7.

[22] Snape, *The Redcoat and Religion*, 7–68.

soldiers to quite the same degree.[23] The Marine Society took orphaned boys and prepared them for a career at sea. Thousands of boy sailors were recruited during this period. Boys aged thirteen or younger joined the navy through this scheme; they could have had little previous contact with civilian religiosity before they joined the enclosed world of the Georgian navy.[24] Civilian Methodism had far fewer points of contact with sailors than it did with soldiers, especially at times when shore leave was a rarity.[25] Lower-deck seamen in the navy, however, both volunteers and pressed men, were recruited from seaports such as Bristol, Plymouth, Portsmouth, and the Cornish ports, where there was considerable Methodist influence.[26]

Several writers have analysed the appeal of Methodism to those whose very existence was precarious: groups such as miners and fishermen for whom danger was ever-present and death an occupational hazard.[27] For sailors these were stark realities. The hazards of battle were self-evident, but just as real, were the threats of disease, shipwreck, fire, frostbite, falling from aloft, capsizing in ships' boats, being struck by lightning, or suffocating in the hold.[28] During the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, the Royal Navy lost 7,000 men in enemy action, 12,000 to shipwreck, and 45,000 from disease.

The connection between the navy's use of impressment throughout this period, and the growth of Methodism amongst sailors of the fleet, is inexact. The crucial role that

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[23] Blake, *Evangelicals in the Royal Navy*, 8.

[24] Jonas Hanway, *Instructions, Religious and Prudential, to Apprentices, and Servants in General, Placed out by the Marine Society* (London: Marine Society, 1763), x–xii.

[25] Blake, *Evangelicals in the Royal Navy*, 32.

[26] Ibid. 35.

[27] Hempton, *Methodism*, 20–2; Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 173.

[28] Brunsman, *The Evil Necessity*, 147–8.

impressment played in recruiting for the Royal Navy throughout this period is emphasized by both Denver Brunsman and Nicholas Rogers.[29] During the early days of Methodism, some local religious and political authorities tried to suppress the growing movement by attempting to impress local preachers and their listeners into both the army and the navy.[30] In Cornwall, in July 1745, Wesley himself was detained, albeit very briefly, 'for His Majesty's Service'.[31] Wesley also refers to a press gang from a man-of-war landing, and presumably hunting for men, whilst he was preaching at Pill in 1756.[32] During the Seven Years War (1756–63), the Countess of Huntingdon was asked to help secure the release from impressment of a group of Methodists detained at Hastings.[33] William Clowes, later the pioneer of Primitive Methodism, was, for a short period, impressed into the Royal Navy in 1803.[34] Although Roald Kverndal identified Methodists as 'soft targets' for the press gangs, impressment appears to have been used to intimidate, rather than deliberately recruit, members of the movement.[35] There is no evidence that the use of the press gang led to a growth of a Methodist presence amongst the men of the navy before 1793. Impressment, in the main, was intended to secure experienced professional sailors to serve as 'able seamen' or 'topmen' who were at a premium in the Georgian Navy. Nonseafaring men were generally of limited value to the navy, although

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[29] Brunsman, *The Evil Necessity*; Nicholas Rogers, *The Press Gang: Naval Impressment and its Opponents in Georgian Britain* (London: Continuum, 2007).

[30] Brunsman, *The Evil Necessity*, 85–6.

[31] Wesley, *Journal and Diaries III*, ed. Ward and Heitzenrater, XX:75.

[32] Wesley, *Journal and Diaries IV*, ed. Ward and Heitzenrater, XXI:44.

[33] Quoted by Rodgers, *The Press Gang*, 136.

[34] Geoffrey Milburn, *Primitive Methodism* (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2002), 19.

[35] Roald Kverndal, *Seamen's Missions: Their Origin and Early Growth* (Pasadena, CA: The Naval and Military Bible Society, 1986), 32.

wartime expediency led to the forced recruitment of men whose connexions with the sea were tenuous. The huge increase in the size of the navy which occurred during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars was made possible, in large part, by impressment. Historians do not agree about the proportion of Nelson's navy that was recruited by coercion; however, for the first time, it included significant numbers of Methodist sailors.[36]

Kverndal saw a strong link between the discharge of thousands of sailors back into civilian society, following the Peace of Amiens in 1802, when the size of the navy was reduced from 130,000 to 50,000 men, and the sharp growth of Methodism aboard ship which occurred when many of these men served again as war resumed. During this period ashore he believes that significant numbers of men were subject to Methodist evangelical influence.[37] It is from the resumption of war in 1803 on, that there is the most significant evidence of Methodist influence in the navy.

In explaining the interchange between soldiers and sailors, and the civilian population, it is important to stress the size of Britain's armed forces, especially during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. Between 1793 and 1815 the proportion of males aged between fifteen and forty who served in the army or navy was between 11% and 14%.[38] These percentages are similar to those of the First World War. By 1814, there were 250,000 men in the British Army, and 140,000 in the Royal Navy; those numbers had increased since 1789 by sixfold and ninefold respectively. At the peak, in 1804, when the threat of French Invasion was at its height, there were nearly half a million men in arms. This unprecedented

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[36] Brunsman, *The Evil Necessity*, 246; Rogers, *The Press Gang*, 4–5. Rodger, *The Wooden World*, 145, 153.

[37] Kverndal, *Seamen's Missions*, 103.

[38] H. V. Bowen, *War and British Society, 1688–1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 14.

mass-mobilization, both in terms of size and the range of men who served, brought with it cross-fertilization between Methodism, the civilian population, and the armed forces.

Sailors' Beliefs and Religious Provision at Sea

Sailors had a reputation as inveterate sinners. Robinson Crusoe summed up their moral and spiritual destitution: 'But alas! Falling into the seafaring life, which of all the lives is the most detestable of the fear of God, though his terrors are always before them.'[39] Bo' sun Smith, Revd George Smith, a former mariner turned Baptist minister, described morality within the navy; sailors were guilty of: 'habitual drunkenness . . . meeting in every port, at home and abroad, with an immense multitude of prostitutes . . . and like leeches . . . they become habitual fornicators, and the destruction of one-half of them by the most virulent disease follows'.[40]

Both Peter Earle and Marcus Rediker, in their examinations of sailors' beliefs and spirituality, describe an absence of organized Christian religion on board ship in the eighteenth century as being the norm.[41] Trust in some form of providential care, however, was a rational necessity, given the hardships and dangers that accompanied life at sea.[42] Seamen were believers in omens and apparitions; they were deeply superstitious but they certainly did not follow the teachings of the Church of England. Sailors were not, though,

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[39] Quoted in Peter Earle, *Sailors: English Merchant Seamen, 1650–1775* (London: Methuen, 1998), 103.

[40] George Charles Smith, *Smith's Tracts etc.* (Portsmouth, 1828), 69.

[41] Earle, *Sailors*, 103; Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700–1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 153.

[42] Magra, 'Faith at Sea', 87–106.

unusual in their belief in the supernatural; Rack saw folklore, magic, and traditional beliefs as being both pervasive, and persistent, in eighteenth century society.[43] Hostility to Roman Catholicism was common in the Royal Navy, born of nationalistic, as much as religious, prejudice.[44] Stephen Berry explored the trope of the spiritually destitute sailor:

> The notion of the irreligious seaman had a long pedigree in Western culture, and this popular conception persisted throughout the eighteenth century . . . The sea provided an analogy for the wicked whose turbulent lives filled their souls with flotsam and jetsam . . . the wildness and intractability of the ocean symbolically stained the men who worked on it.[45]

Clergymen noted that the seaman's life was accompanied by almost constant danger; he had due cause to fear the power of God, but his response was found in blasphemy and swearing rather than orthodox Christian faith.[46] James Meikle was a Scottish Presbyterian Seceder who served in the navy as a surgeon's mate during the Seven Years War. His memoirs record the deep shock to his pious sensibilities that he felt when he boarded the *Portland* on Sunday 7 July 1758:

> I believe, the demoniacs in the gospel were never more under the devil's power than many of these men are, whether we look to their lives or their language . . . This day, when I took a serious survey of the wickedness practised about me, when I saw the call of God cast off, heard them on the morning of the Lord's day swearing and

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[43] Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast*, 23–4.

[44] Magra, 'Faith at Sea', 103–6.

[45] Stephen R. Berry, *A Path in the Mighty Waters: Shipboard Life and Atlantic Crossings to the New World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 86.

[46] Margarette Lincoln, *Representing the Royal Navy, British Sea Power, 1750–1815* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 117.

> singing obscene songs, and observed the ship's boats bringing lewd women aboard, no respect being paid to the holy Sabbath, . . . I was filled with vexation, grief, and, might I say, holy indignation, till my breast ached, and I was pained at my heart.[47]

In September 1771, as he crossed the Atlantic, Francis Asbury labelled the seamen on board his ship as 'insensible creatures' who rejected the means of salvation that he offered them.[48]

Coupled with an irreligious climate, chaplaincy provision in the navy was inadequate as, indeed, it was in the army of the eighteenth century. Although the Royal Navy was both Protestant and Anglican, very few clergymen actually went to sea in the eighteenth century. The Admiralty left the spiritual well-being of crews in the hands of ships' captains. In theory, according to the regulations of 1731, there was a requirement for divine service twice every day, and for a sermon on Sundays, but observance was extremely infrequent. Blake examined the log books of four Royal Navy vessels, of varying sizes, during the 1740s and found very few instances of divine service having occurred. Over nine years, on 450 Sundays at sea, a total of four services took place; an average of one on each ship.[49] Pluralism was a problem in naval chaplaincy; in 1742 the Navy Board wrote to captains instructing them not to pay chaplains who held warrants but never actually served on the ships to which they were appointed.[50] A chaplain was only present on the larger ships and communion was rarely observed because most were deacons. In 1752 a Commodore wrote to an aspiring young

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[47] James Meikle, *The Traveller, or, Meditations on Various Subjects Written on Board a Man of War* (Edinburgh: J. Pillans and Sons, 1811), xliv–xlvi.

[48] *The Journal and Letters of Francis Asbury*, ed. Elmer T. Clark, J. Manning Potts, and Jacob S. Payton, 3 vols (London: Epworth Press, 1958), I:5–6.

[49] Blake, *Evangelicals in the Royal Navy*, 69–71.

[50] Waldo E. L. Smith, *The Navy and its Chaplains in the Days of Sail* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1961), 67.

naval officer about worship at sea: ‘You will see some little outward appearance of religion, and Sunday prayers; but the congregation is generally drove together by the boatswain, like sheep by the shepherd, who neither spares oaths or blows.’[51] Chaplains were difficult to recruit and generally of a very poor quality. Pay was inadequate; it had remained unchanged since the time of Charles II.[52] The chaplain of James Meikle’s ship, the *Portland*, was ‘expelled’ from the ship in 1758 for some unspecified ‘wickedness’.[53] A letter of 1759 addressed to ‘the Officers of the British Navy’ summarized the deficiencies of chaplaincy:

> A chaplainship in the navy is procured by interest. Now the same interest which enables a man to obtain his office is sufficient also to get him excused from attendance in the duties of it, for a cruise or an expedition cannot be supposed to be extremely agreeable to a person who has had a liberal education.[54]

Revd Percival Stockdale, writing to his patron David Garrick in 1775, was horrified that, as naval chaplain, he might actually be required to go to sea: ‘When you were so good as to apply for me for this chaplainship, neither you nor I thought that in consequence of obtaining it I should be obliged to be near the ship or on board.’[55] In 1816, Richard Marks, former marine officer, castigated the naval chaplains that he had encountered during his career: ‘Few ships ever had a chaplain on board and several which had them would have been better off without them; with very few exceptions they were the butt of officers jokes, and furnished too

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[51] Quoted in Lincoln, *Representing the Royal Navy*, 118.

[52] Blake, *Evangelicals in the Royal Navy*, 16–32.

[53] Meikle, *The Traveller*, lxv.

[54] Gordon Taylor, *The Sea Chaplains: A History of the Chaplains of the Royal Navy* (Oxford: Oxford Illustrated Press, 1978), 170.

[55] Quoted in N. A. M. Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean: A Naval History of Britain, 1649–1815* (London: Allen Lane, 2004), 393.

many sad objects of their contempt and ridicule.'[56] A letter published in the *Naval Chronicle* of 1802, written by Joshua Larwood, 'an old clerical servant in the navy', labelled chaplains as 'idlers' and suggested that an additional role as schoolmasters to young sailors would see them far more productively employed.[57] Admiral John Jervis, Earl St Vincent, when commanding the Mediterranean Fleet, wrote to the First Lord of the Admiralty, complaining of 'roué parsons', one of whom was convicted of selling spirits to seamen on his ships.[58] The Reverend Edward Mangin was utterly despairing; for him shipboard chaplaincy had proved to be an impossible challenge:

> I did not see the smallest likelihood of effecting material change in the morals of such an assemblage. To leave them unreproved and vicious was possible; and I dare say it was equally possible to transform them all into Methodists, or madmen and hypocrites of some other kind: but to convert a man-of-war's crew into Christians would be a task to which the courage of Loyola, the philanthropy of Howard, and the eloquence of St Paul united would prove inadequate.[59]

In such a spiritual vacuum it is not surprising that there was an increase in the expression of religiosity in general, and evangelical piety in particular, during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. This period saw a marked increase in evangelicalism in Great Britain; Methodists, Baptists, and Congregationalists all saw rapid growth, as did evangelical influence in The Church of England. Evangelicalism influenced wider public life

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[56] Quoted in Blake, *Evangelicals in the Royal Navy*, 75.

[57] *The Naval Chronicle, containing a General and Biographical History of the Royal Navy of the United Kingdom: with a Variety of Original Papers on Nautical Subjects*, vol. 7. January–June 1802, p. 374.

[58] Quoted in Smith, *The Navy and its Chaplains*, 103.

[59] Quoted in Blake, *Evangelicals in the Royal Navy*, 79.

and society. Increasing religiosity found expression in the foundation of the Missionary Society (1795), the Religious Tract Society (1799), the Society for the Suppression of Vice (1802), the British and Foreign Bible Society (1804), and the campaign which led to the abolition of the slave trade (1807).[60] Britain's armed forces were also the targets of these pious and philanthropic broadsides. The first Bible society was created by Methodists and its aim was to supply scripture to soldiers and sailors. The Naval and Military Bible Society (NMBS), though Methodist in origin, became ecumenical and had a very broad and influential base of support. Nelson and other admirals supported the work of NMBS and that of other societies with similar aims such as the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge and the Religious Tract Society. Admiral Nelson applied to the NMBS for 900 books for the crew of the *San Josef* serving in the Baltic in 1801. This commitment to supply the men of the Royal Navy with Bibles and tracts attests to the growing interest in their spiritual well-being.

The end of the eighteenth century saw a marked increase in evangelicalism within the Royal Navy.[61] The navy became an instrument in a religious struggle against atheistic France, a linking together of Protestant piety, patriotism, and a desire to provide sailors with strong spiritual leadership. A unique cultural symbol of a united island Britain, the navy provided a focus for patriotism and feelings of superiority over France. War on land was not infrequently a failure before 1808; in contrast, the navy enjoyed far greater public esteem.[62] 'The sea is the

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[60] Martin Wellings, 'British Methodism and Evangelicalism', in William J. Abraham and James E. Kirby, eds, *The Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 159–60.

[61] Blake, *Evangelicals in the Royal Navy*, 61–75.

[62] Timothy Jenks, *Naval Engagements: Patriotism, Cultural Politics, and the Royal Navy, 1793–1815* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 27–9.

proper scene wherein to display our national superiority', proclaimed one newspaper in 1794.[63]

That 'superiority' became manifest in a significant improvement in the spiritual provision for the men of the Royal Navy. Evidence of the seriousness with which divine service was being observed by the time of the Revolutionary Wars appears in the diary of Revd Cooper Willyams, who served as chaplain on the *Boyne*, during the expedition to the West Indies of 1793 and 1794:

> The 25th of December, being Christmas Day, divine service was performed on the quarterdeck by the Chaplain, the crew appearing as on Sunday in clean trowsers and jakets: and here I must beg leave to mention that I never saw more regularity and decorum in any place of worship than is invariably observed on His Majesty's ships of war.[64]

Gareth Atkins saw the growth of religiosity and evangelicalism, during the period from 1793 to 1815, as having been strongly influenced by several individuals within the navy.[65] Sir Charles Middleton, the future Lord Barham, and his nephew, James Gambier, the captain of *HMS Defence* during the Battle of the Glorious First of June 1794, were both influential 'Blue Lights', evangelicals, in the navy of this period.[66] Middleton's insistence on spiritual provision on board ship led to his being dubbed 'a superannuated Methodist' by an opponent.[67] He was certainly not a Methodist, but his Anglican evangelicalism was influenced by George Whitefield, and he had, on occasion, attended a chapel of the Countess

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Blake, Evangelicals in the Royal Navy, 150-151

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[63] *Morning Post*, 26 June 1794, quoted in Jenks, *Naval Engagements*, 28.

[64] Quoted in Smith, *The Navy and its Chaplains*, 79.

[65] Atkins, 'Christian Heroes', 393–414.

[66] Blake, *Evangelicals in the Royal Navy*, 150-151.

[67] Ibid. 45.

of Huntingdon's Connexion. Middleton was friendly with prison reformer John Howard and had strong links to members of the Clapham Sect.[68] In 1806 Middleton became First Lord of the Admiralty and Lord Barham. His issue of new regulations and instructions in that year included directions that a ship's chaplain lead regular prayers on board, preach sermons, visit the sick, comfort the dying, and supervise educational provision. The pay of chaplains was increased in 1807, reflecting their improved status; however, they still earned less than ordinary seamen, cooks, and stewards.[69] Middleton defined the moral leadership of all officers, which included promoting respect for religion and suppressing vice. There is considerable evidence for the growth of an evangelical subculture within the Royal Navy from 1793 onwards, described by Blake as 'Blue Lights' among the officers and, on the lower deck, 'Psalm Singers'.[70] In such a climate Methodism amongst sailors thrived.

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Admiral Nelson's personal morality might be questioned, but what cannot be doubted is that he created an environment, on board the ships that he commanded, which encouraged the outward profession of Christian belief. Following victory at the Battle of the Nile on 2 August 1798, he ordered public thanksgiving to God to be observed: 'Almighty God having blessed his Majesty's arms with victory, the Admiral intends returning public thanksgiving for the same at two-o'clock this day and recommends every ship doing the same as soon as convenient.'[71] In a letter of 1801, following the Battle of Copenhagen, Nelson attributed the conduct of his crew to 'a belief that good to our King and Country may have arisen from the seamen and marines having been shown to respect the established religion and Kings have

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[68] Gareth Atkins, 'Religion, Politics and Patronage in the late Hanoverian Navy, c. 1780–c. 1820', *Historical Research*, 88/240 (May 2015), 274–8.

[69] Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean*, 625.

[70] Blake, *Evangelicals in the Royal Navy*, 2,31.

[71] *The Naval Chronicle*, January–June 1799, vol. 2, p. 59.

been shown that our seamen are religious'.[72] It is highly unlikely that a similar comment about sailors' piety might have been made in the middle of the previous century. Both Nelson's avowed public religiosity, and his acknowledgement of the apparent piety of his men, are evidence of the growing influence of evangelicalism afloat.

Notwithstanding that there were some improvements in chaplaincy provision, by 1814 there were only fifty-eight naval chaplains, of whom thirty-one served at sea. The vast majority of ships and sailors never saw a clergyman afloat.[73] Christian provision in the fleet was certainly improved, but not transformed, between 1793 and 1815. The growth of Methodist observance afloat was stimulated both by a more encouraging spiritual environment, but also by its deficiencies in meeting the needs of common sailors.

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The Development of Methodism in the Navy

The *Arminian Magazine*, which commenced publication in 1778, made no reference in its first fifteen years to Methodism in the Royal Navy. Ordinary sailors of the eighteenth century left little written evidence of any kind, so the absence of testimony from men who served aboard ships of war is hardly surprising. Yet this applies, to an extent, also to the army. The lack of evidence for any Methodist activity in the navy for the period before the outbreak of the Revolutionary War is extraordinary, especially when compared to the relatively plentiful material that exists after 1793. The first letter from a Methodist in the Royal Navy that appears in the *Arminian Magazine* is dated 27 June 1794 and was written by a sailor on board the *Caesar*, a ship of Admiral Howe's fleet based at Spithead. The unnamed sailor records the events of the Battle of the Glorious First of June. The writer states that he was one of only

[72] Quoted in Taylor, *The Sea Chaplains*, 240.

[73] Michael Lewis, *A Social History of the Navy, 1793–1815* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1960), 252.

two Methodist sailors on board and that he and his companion prayed together before the battle.[74] Blake sees little evidence of Methodism in the navy before this period; however, he makes links with the Spithead and Nore Mutinies of 1797: 'It can be no more than guesswork, but it is interesting to speculate whether Methodists were used to pass mutinous correspondence, or even that they were instrumental in organising the mutinies.'[75] Such speculation may be 'interesting' but Blake produces no evidence whatsoever to substantiate this claim. There was no Methodist involvement in either of these episodes, or in any of the other mutinies which occurred on Royal Naval ships between 1797 and 1801.[76] These mutinies, though, did raise suspicion of small groups meeting for prayer, with fears that the common sailor was 'susceptible' to Methodism.[77]

From 1794 on, references to Methodist societies, albeit usually small in membership, are fairly frequent. A private in the Gordon Highlanders described an active and influential Methodist society on board the *Terrible*, which transported his regiment to the Mediterranean in April 1799: 'religion appeared to have so far prevailed in this ship'.[78] William Rule cites sailors from the *Hector* and the *Defence*, both 74 gunships of the line, the 94 gun *Queen*, and the fireship *Incendiary*, as attending Methodist meetings in Gibraltar in the 1790s.[79] A letter from a Scottish soldier returned from the Rock mentions that some seven or eight of the crew

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[74] *The Arminian Magazine*, 18 (June 1795), 308.

[75] Blake, *Evangelicals in the Royal Navy*, 93.

[76] Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean*, 446; Brunsman, *The Evil Necessity*, 198–9.

[77] Lincoln, *Representing the Royal Navy*, 126.

[78] *Narrative of a Private Soldier in His Majesty's 92nd Regiment of Foot/ Written by Himself: with a Preface by the Revd Ralph Wardlaw* (Glasgow, 1820), 56.

[79] William Harris Rule, *Wesleyan Methodism in the British Army* (London: T. Woolmer, 1883), 16.

of the frigate *Terpsichole* met on board ‘as often as duty would permit to read and pray’. The little Methodist society on this ship gave forty-six dollars of prize money to the steward of the newly-established chapel on Gibraltar.[80] Watkins is emphatic that there were Methodists at the Battle of Trafalgar. He quotes ‘an early number of the Gentlemen’s Magazine’ regarding a Methodist cell on board *HMS Victory*:

> The dogs were the best seamen on board. Every man *knew* his duty; and every man *did* his duty. They meet together and sing hymns and nobody dared to molest them. The commander would not have suffered it had they attempted it. They were allowed a mess to themselves, and never mixed with the other men.[81]

J. Glass, a sailor on-board *Le Tonant*, was present at Trafalgar. He wrote to the *Arminian Magazine* of the Methodists on the ship: ‘We assembled together every night upon the main deck, where we join in praise and prayer to God . . . also scripture reading’. Before the battle, ‘We were upward of twenty in number; one was killed of whose happiness we have not the least doubt. One we left at Gibraltar in a prize, and some have become weary in well doing.’[82] H. Roberts was a sail maker who served on the same vessel. The following year he stated that the Methodist society on board now numbered thirty men.[83] A sailor, ‘E. P.’, on board the *Dreadnought*, wrote to the Arminian Magazine in 1810, the first letter that he had ever written, so he claimed. He had been converted by John Clark who also taught him to write.[84] Sailors from the *Coulaque* and the *Revenge*, in the same period, detail small but thriving Methodist classes on board their ships. They also name the *Caledonia*, the *Royal George*, the

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[80] *The Methodist Magazine*, 25 (June 1802), 327.

[81] Watkins, *Soldiers and Preachers Too*, 50.

[82] *The Methodist Magazine*, 29 (April 1806), 330.

[83] *The Methodist Magazine*, 30 (April 1807), 187.

[84] *The Methodist Magazine*, 33 (June 1810), 244–5.

Prince of Wales, the *Armado*, and the *Berwick*, as ships with Methodist societies ranging in size from eight to sixty men.[85] An extract from a letter published in November 1814 written by James Ashford, a sailor on board the *Repulse*, describes a 'little flock' aboard of between thirty and forty, and also reports societies on board the *Caledonia*, the *Royal George* and the *Hibernia*, and 'other ships in the Mediterranean fleet'.[86]

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Letters published in the Methodist press refer specifically to societies on nineteen named ships during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. By 1815, there was, Kverndal concludes, 'genuine organised Methodism' on nearly 100 ships of war, more than a quarter of the navy's strength.[87] The Royal Navy numbered 140,000 men at the peak of its strength in 1814. If Methodist societies, of perhaps an average of 25 men, existed on each of 100 ships as Kverndal suggests, that would give a figure of approximately 2500, or 2% of men in the service. This figure is no more than a very rough estimate; an accurate calculation would be impossible. The 1811 Census recorded the population of England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales as 18,044,000. There were 181,200 Methodist members recorded in the same year with possibly twice as many adherents.[88] The proportion of Methodists in the Royal Navy, therefore, seems to broadly mirror civilian society.

One of the particular problems with the study of Methodism in the navy is that the term 'Methodist' was used both very loosely and as a pejorative term. The label was applied to any man of a spiritual, especially evangelical, disposition who openly attested to his beliefs on board. The varied uses of the term 'Methodist' in the Royal Navy are attested to by the former marine officer, Richard Marks, who wrote: '"Methodists" (was) a term which in their

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[85] *The Methodist Magazine*, 37 (June 1814), 471–2.

[86] *The Methodist Magazine*, 37 (November 1814), 877

[87] Kverndal, *Seamen's Missions*, 109.

[88] G. M. Ditchfield, *The Evangelical Revival* (London: Routledge, 2003), 83.

vocabulary, comprised of individuals of all sects, parties, ranks and ages who feared God and endeavoured to work righteously.' Even his fellow officers, said Marks, 'knew not the meaning of the word'.[89] Atkins saw 'Methodism' as a very broad label in the navy and also an insult.[90] It was certainly an imprecise term in the Royal Navy during this period as indeed it was more generally during the movement's first 75 years.[91] One must, therefore, differentiate Methodism as a broad, generic, and depreciatory term, from those sailors who formed societies on board ship and informed the wider movement of their 'heart religion' through, for example, letters written to *the Arminian* and *Methodist Magazines*.

The growing acceptance of collective and individual spiritual observance on board was separated by rank. Those officers attracted by evangelicalism promoted a climate on their ships whereby their men could express their piety through adherence to Methodism. Evangelical officers, 'Blue Lights', were firmly differentiated by Blake, from Methodist other ranks, 'Psalm Singers'.[92] Some pious officers believed that their men's souls and morality would benefit from regular Anglican observance and access to scripture. Both status and inclination, however, barred them from joining their men in societies of believers.

Methodist activity was particularly strong amongst naval prisoners of war during the Napoleonic period. Blake saw different group dynamics and discipline in the French prison

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[89] [Richard Marks] ('Aliquis'), *The Retrospect: Or Review of Providential Mercies with Anecdotes of Various Characters, and an Address to Naval Officers* (London: J. Nisbet, 1820), 81–2.

[90] Atkins, 'Religion, Politics and Patronage', 274–5.

[91] William Gibson, 'The Complexity of Methodism', in William Gibson, Peter Forsaith, and Martin Wellings, eds, *The Ashgate Research Companion to World Methodism* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 1.

[92] Blake, *Evangelicals in the Royal Navy*, 2, 31.

fortresses from those of a man-of-war. There were cells at Givet in 1805 and also at Cambrai, where Jeremiah Taylor led a society of over forty, with up to seventy prisoners attending meetings twice a day for prayer and hymn singing. Taylor was aware of similar groups meeting at Valenciennes, Verdun, and Longwy.[93] Bo' sun Smith claimed that almost 800 men converted during this period and Kverndal believes that the men who served a spiritual apprenticeship in these French prisoner of war fortresses, later led the 1816 Thames Revival amongst merchant mariners.[94] The separation of officers and men created an environment in which Methodism flourished. Such evidence suggests that Methodism in the navy thrived in the absence of the influence of officers rather than as a direct result of their religious influence.

Hymn singing was an important expression of Methodist belief and method of its transmission. Hymns were clearly of significance for Methodist sailors. J. Glass described nightly hymn singing on board the *Tonant* before the Battle of Trafalgar.[95] Such was the importance attached to Wesley's *Hymns for the Use of the People Called Methodists* that those sailors, incarcerated in French prisons during the Napoleonic War, copied it out by hand in order that the hymns could be sung at their services.[96]

Reactions to Methodism in the navy can broadly be said to have mirrored those seen in the army. Methodism on board ship had the potential to be seen as divisive, puritanical, exclusive, and censorious. The promotion of sobriety, honesty, charity, reliability, and duty, however, endeared Methodist sailors to officers. Their steadiness gave opportunities for

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[93] Blake, *Evangelicals in the Royal Navy*, 243.

[94] Smith, *Smith's Tracts*, 69–70; Kverndal, *Seamen's Missions*, 111.

[95] *The Methodist Magazine*, 29 (July 1806), 330.

[96] Kverndal, *Seamen's Missions*, 111.

promotion within the Royal Navy; this was especially so during wartime.[97] When opposition occurred, it took the form of mockery rather than violence. Bo' sun Smith described verbal abuse directed at the religious mob, the sanctified sect, the psalm-singing Methodist club. He also gave an example of opponents who sent a number of prostitutes on board ship to break up a Methodist meeting.[98] A caricature, *The Sailor and the Field Preacher*, published by Rudolph Ackerman in 1805, derides the influence of Methodism. The preacher, clearly both effete and Methodist, surrounded by apparently attentive listeners, proclaims: 'I hear a voice from Heaven!' Sturdy Jack Tar, who has clearly been busy with a blowzy woman on some higher ground nearby, replies: 'Come – Come – none of your fore castle gammon with me you Swab – have I not been aloft this half hour and if so be any orders of that kind come – down – don't you think I should have heard them first.'[99] 'Psalm Singer', wrote Lieutenant Richard Marks, was 'a term of derision and contempt, among common seamen'.[100] 'Wingers' was a description applied because small societies met, sometimes behind canvas screens erected for privacy, in the wings of the ship; the label 'stigmatized' Methodist sailors, according to Marks.[101] John Hubbock, who organized a Methodist society on *HMS Elizabeth*, was threatened with flogging for seditious assembly but the threat was not carried out.[102] When John Owen became Chaplain General of the Royal Navy in 1812, in addition to

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[97] Brunsman, *The Evil Necessity*, 166.

[98] Blake, *Evangelicals in the Royal Navy*, 237.

[99] Rudolph Ackermann, 'The Sailor, and the Field Preacher', The National Maritime Museum, PAF3796.

[100] [Marks] ('Aliquis'), *The Retrospect*, 79.

[101] Ibid. 82.

[102] Kverndal, *Seamen's Missions*, 109.

holding that role in the army, he was concerned by the growth of Methodism in the fleet.[103] Both Bo' sun Smith and Lieutenant Richard Marks describe opposition to Methodism in the navy declining during the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, as evidenced by the notable increase in societies meeting by the end of the period.[104]

The leadership of what were often very fragile and transient cells was crucial in determining their endurance and success. Where strong lay leadership existed, such as that provided by sail maker H. Roberts on the *Tonant*, Methodism flourished. In a movement where lay preaching was such a vital element, it is perhaps self-evident that this was the case. There is very little evidence of any connexional organization or planning in the spread of Methodism in either the army or the navy. With the notable exception of the NMBS, there is no evident structure to its mission to the armed forces. Minutes of Conference from 1744 to 1815 do not record the dispatch of preachers to garrisons, ports, or on campaign. What is most striking about the records of Methodist Conference in this period is the complete absence of references to mission to soldiers and sailors. There is not one single mention of the armed forces either during John Wesley's lifetime, or in the period up to 1815.[105]

The first ordained minister to be posted to a military base was sent to Gibraltar in 1804; however, this was to a flourishing congregation of civilians, in addition to soldiers and sailors, and this is the only example during the first seventy-five years of Methodism.[106] There is no suggestion that the stationing of Revd James McMullen on the island was, in any

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[103] Ibid. 109.

[104] Blake, *Evangelicals in the Royal Navy*, 232–5.

[105] *Minutes of the Methodist Conferences From The First, Held in London By the Late Revd John Wesley A. M. In The Year 1744*, vols 1–72 (London: Butterworth, Baines and Hamilton, 1744–1815).

[106] Rule, *Wesleyan Methodism in the British Army*, 20.

sense, a military mission. By 1814 Methodist missionaries had been dispatched to several Caribbean islands, Ceylon, the Cape of Good Hope, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, New South Wales, Sierra Leone, and in addition, in greatest numbers, to Ireland. In that year, 56 preachers were sent by Conference on mission, but not one with a specific brief for ministry to the armed forces.[107] Before the outbreak of the Crimean War there is very little evidence of any connexional engagement with Britain's armed forces. In spite of the evidence of considerable Methodist presence in the army and the navy, such mission that did occur was completely ad hoc.

The influence of Methodist sailors on their comrades was diffuse; Kverndal, however, traces a strong link between Methodism in the navy in this period and the later development of seamen's missions: 'Methodism's cell-group system produced the blueprint for the Bethel Movement that gave birth to the Seafarers Mission Movement.'[108] Bo' sun Smith, founder of that Seafarers Mission Movement, acknowledged the debt to Methodism: 'It is notorious that it began, as most good things that require active zeal do, among the Wesleyan Methodists . . . God was pleased to honour the denomination to start this great work.'[109]

Conclusion

By 1815 Methodism had gained a presence amongst the common sailors of the Royal Navy; this certainly bears comparison with the army and British society as a whole. In sharp contrast to the army during the same period, there is very little evidence of any Methodist

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[107] *Minutes of the Methodist Conferences*, vol. 71 (1814).

[108] Roald Kverndal, *The Way of the Sea: the Changing Shape of Mission in the Seafaring World* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Publications, 2008), 16.

[109] Ibid. 20.

activity in the Royal Navy before the outbreak of the war with Revolutionary France. The navy appears to have been more resistant than the army to Methodist inroads before 1793, largely due to the irreligious climate amongst sailors and the woefully poor spiritual provision made for them. There is ample material, however, to conclude that Methodist influence in the Royal Navy, though it occurred later, became very significant during the period from 1793 to 1815. The outbreak of war with Revolutionary and Napoleonic France saw a growth of evangelicalism aboard and a growing interest in sailors' souls. Due, in part, to this impetus, Methodism gained a foothold in the navy between 1793 and 1802. There was a small, but growing, number of Methodist common sailors during the Revolutionary Wars. After the resumption of war in 1803, the movement's influence in the fleet increased to the point where there had developed a flourishing Methodist subculture in the Royal Navy. Methodism in Britain's navy, which was first established in this period, was to persist throughout the nineteenth century and beyond. That presence deserves recognition in both the history of Methodism and that of the Royal Navy.

Why did Methodism take hold in the Royal Navy between 1793 and 1815 when it appears to have been largely absent beforehand? The navy of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic era was both much larger and, consequently, more representative of civilian society, including in its denominational diversity, than had hitherto been the case. The navy became far less of a closed world and more open to external influences. Impressment, used very extensively during these wars, resulted in the recruitment of a broader range of men. There was much more interchange with civilian society than had previously occurred; this was especially the case during The Peace of Amiens (1802–3). Although there is some evidence of the spread of Methodism presence amongst the men of the navy from 1793 to 1802, there is far more source material dating from the period 1803 to 1815. In the absence of any coordinated connexional ministry to sailors, it was the influence of individual sailors on

their shipmates that led to the growth of Methodism in the navy. Growing literacy amongst common sailors, the ability to read scripture and write letters, helped in the dissemination of Methodism. The official promotion of organized Protestant religiosity through improved chaplaincy provision, the supply of Bibles, testaments, and tracts, and an increasingly favourable climate amongst naval officers, created a more accepting environment in which Methodism could thrive. By 1815 the reputation of the sailor had, in part, been transformed; the Christian sailor was no longer an oxymoron.

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