Faith and Religion amongst Multinational Crews

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“Methinks sometimes I have no more wit than a Christian or an ordinary man has [...].

(Twelfth Night) act 1, sc 3,1. [90]
1. What do seafarers do or do not do, in the context of religious plurality on board, in order to maintain peace at sea?

2. How do seafarers practise or profess their religion or faith at sea?

3. What is the role of religion to seafarers?
An Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) study focusing on the religious lives of seafarers at sea and in ports

Archival research (on-going)
Fieldwork on two merchant vessels (complete)
Fieldwork in two ports (on-going)

A collaboration of academics from the UK and the US (Cardiff University; Chichester University and Brandeis University) Prof Helen Sampson, Prof Sophie Gilliat-Ray, Prof Graeme Smith, Prof Wendy Cadge

The study runs for three years and seven months
First ship: bulk carrier (From Bluff, New Zealand to Qingdao, China)

Second ship: LNG tanker (From Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago to Guayanilla, Puerto Rico)

Religions on board: Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism
Sailed with seafarers for seven weeks on both two ships; interacted with the crew, attended events on board (Saturday karaoke nights and Christmas and New Year parties); conducted semi-structured interviews with the crew.
Primacy of occupational identity over other identities
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2Mate: On board you always working together with other countries. We have all you need, work together and don’t hate, right? And on board, maybe I am talking on duty time, be friendly and always talk with others, smile. But for example something like two countries government, they don't like each other [...] But for seafarer, seafarer you should work on board you only working easily for money. For your family. Right? Forget the government.

Capt: Why we come on board? Leave family, leave girlfriend, leave wife, leave friend, make money, we work on board to make money. We not come for trouble. So for religion, I don’t think this a problem on board.
(Not) talking about religion on board

Most of the time, seafarers prefer to talk about:

1. Work issues and concerns (technical challenges, schedule, etc)
2. Previous co-workers (especially the more colourful ones like eccentric/hated/loved officers)
3. Company policies and officials (especially crewing staff and superintendents)
4. Investment opportunities back home
5. Sports (NBA, Football, etc)
Respect for everyone’s faith or religion

AB4: Well, for one, we need to respect each other’s religion. In their case, when they have their prayers, we should not disturb them as a show of respect. So that time even if I was asked by our bosun to tell them to do some work, if it’s 6 pm, I don’t come up to them and relay the information. I wait for them to finish their prayers and then (when they are done with their prayers) that’s the time when I tell them the work that they need to do.
CAPT: ... I always show respect. As long as you don’t do anything that insults them there’s no problem. I think that is common sense, decency, really. So I don't have that list, that thinking, say, oops, that guy there is a Muslim so when I talk to him I should not be doing this. No. I talk to everyone respectfully regardless of religion or nationality.
Religion as a private matter

Captain: I don’t care (about other people’s religion), I don’t pay attention. I don’t ask because you are on board for working. So whatever is your religion it’s up to you. It’s not my concern.
Freedom to practise one’s religion at sea

But this freedom to practise one’s religion does not mean freedom to proselytise or harangue others to join religious activities on board.
Accommodating religious needs at sea

- Catering to different religious dietary requirements
- Preparation of food according to religious observances, for instances on Good Friday, or Ramadan
CAPT: [...] As I say, my experience is mostly with Christians but I have had a few Muslims. Of course, they have their pray time and ask for time off, and check the direction where Mecca lies. So just leave them for a while and they do their praying. Dietary requirements, of course, we have to respect that.
Religion as refuge

AB1: And now I realise, now that it all came back to me, you know what, on board, there will always be time when religion is your last resort. Religion is your only hope, or the only thing that you think about because there is nothing to think about anyway. And you have nothing to hold on to. Ashore, you have your family when you experience bad times or in trouble. At sea, you are on your own. Others can’t help you because they themselves are in trouble.

AB4: [...] if I get bored, stressed out or lonely, I listen to Christian songs, that’s what I do. So on Sunday, if I feel that way, I just stay in my cabin and listen to Christian songs. I tell you, that really helps me because listening to lyrics, I realise how lucky I am to be working at sea, to have a loving family, that kind of thing. So the doom and gloom, the sadness dissipates. Christian songs have a very uplifting message.
AC: I think it is because when you are at sea, you are on your own, you are alone, looking after yourself. Then when you have a problem, you only have your faith in God to help you. So I think it is the idea of being alone, with no one to help you, that makes you realise and believe in the importance of faith, of religion.
But (not) all is well that ends well

In some circumstances, seafarers feel constrained to practise their faith.

Some seafarers get bullied by their own peers because their religious beliefs clash with occupational customs and practices on board.

Religious dietary requirements of religious minorities are sometimes sidestepped.
To be or not to be

Religion is important

Religion is integral to well-being

Religion as anchor

The data collected from two ship voyages are yet to be fully analysed. Archival work is on-going. The first port fieldwork is complete and the second one will commence in August and will end in October.