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Harmony of the Seas?: Work, faith, and religious difference among multinational migrant workers on board cargo ships

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ABSTRACT


This paper advances a long-standing sociological interest in the relationship between religion and work. As protections for freedom of religious expression have played a more central role in the US and Europe, questions have been raised about the implications for people who are associated with heterogeneous workplaces. In this context, we consider the work-based practices of multinational groups of migrant workers who self-affiliate to a variety of religions and none. Our research employed non-participant observation and semi-structured interviews with multinational groups of seafarers working on cargo vessels, as well as participant observation with seafarers and chaplains in ports. The findings indicate that religious beliefs offer solace and support to seafarers. However, they also highlight workers' desire for religion to be kept private on board in order to avoid interpersonal conflict. The findings have broader application in a variety of diverse environments where migrant and indigenous workers are employed.

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Introduction

Cruise ship lines tend to provide names for their vessels which conjure idyllic images of perfect tranquillity mixed with endless entertainment in the perfect “cocktail of a holiday”. Thus in 2016, when *Royal Caribbean Cruises* launched the largest cruise vessel in the world¹ it was no surprise to find her named *Harmony of the Seas*. However, despite the rapid expansion of the cruise

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market there is another sector of the global shipping industry where multinational crews work together, albeit in far smaller groups, and where vessel operators hope for similarly utopian harmony.

The contemporary shipping industry operates with one of the most globalized labour markets in the world. Ships are largely owned in OECD countries; the majority are flagged with open registers (also known as Flags of Convenience) and they are usually operated by mixed nationality crews (Sampson 2013) employed on a “per voyage” basis as migrants working beyond their own national borders (Sampson 2003). Such crews are composed of individuals who identify themselves with a variety of different religions and none.

The crew of an ocean-going tanker, container vessel, or bulk carrier, typically numbers between 13 and 25 members. They are mostly men and they work in a stressful, institutionalized, and hierarchical setting. Seafaring is acknowledged to be amongst the most dangerous occupations and seafarers face additional pressures at sea such as fear of criminalization and of piracy (Jezewska and Iversen 2012). Many seafarers describe their lives at sea as a “sacrifice” on behalf of their families. They are much more often lonely at sea than when ashore (Sampson and Ellis 2019) and they frequently say that working on a cargo ship is like being in prison. In this context and given the different ways in which the role of religion has been conceptualized and studied in the workplace, it is particularly interesting to consider it in relation to these multi-ethnic/multinational settings.

This paper draws on research undertaken as part of an ESRC-funded study (ES/N019423/1). The study was designed to allow for the exploration of the role of religion and belief at sea and to consider the means by which seafarers navigate differences in religion and belief in highly constrained institutionalized workplace settings. Using the example of migrant seafarers, we wish to shed light on how, and why, workers negotiate religious differences and what lessons can be drawn from their experiences and applied to broader settings.

Considering religion and work

Defining “religion” has been a challenge for sociologists and was recognized as such in the work of Georg Simmel as long ago as in the 1890s (McKinnon 2002). The debates over definition have long-since continued with many concluding that despite on-going efforts to arrive at universal definitions of religion (see for example Geertz 1973) “religion” resists such classification. Talal Asad is not alone when he asserts, for example, that “there can be no universal definition of religion” (Asad 1993, 29).

The somewhat tortuous reflections on definitions of religion within sociology have been suggested by some to epitomize the reasons why academics

are often seen in a poor light by the “general public” (Bruce 2011). Bruce indicates that there is a substantial chasm:

between those scholars who think that arguments about definitions are very important and those of us who believe that some loose largely commonsensical conceptualization of religion is sufficient to allow us to get on with our primary purpose of exploring its sociologically interesting features. (Bruce 2011, 118)

Thus, Bruce argues for a “relaxed” definition of religion suggesting that “it does not prevent us doing good social science” (Bruce 2011, 116). In a similar vein, McKinnon argues that the fact that this question about a definition of religion has remained largely unsettled does not prevent us from conceptualizing religion sociologically (McKinnon 2002). He suggests:

[...] concepts like “religion” have real social consequences, and are important constitutive elements in the construction of global, national, and local social formations. In that sense, however, there is such a “thing” as religion – or at least, it is a term we cannot do without – and we “know” what it means. (McKinnon 2002, 81)

The debates here are complex and our purpose is not to revisit or comprehensively rehearse them but rather to acknowledge the difficulty in arriving at a satisfactory definition (Harrison 2006) which encompasses an “essence” of religion in relation to the collection and analysis of empirical data. In this paper, we are therefore content to draw upon “loose” everyday understandings of religion whilst **not** contending that sociological definitions should be confined to these alone.

The three Sociologists who are commonly regarded as the founders of the discipline, all paid attention to the role of religions in society. While Durkheim is known for his focus on the role of religious differences in the classification of deaths, and most particularly suicides, Marx and Weber were more interested in the links between the economy and religions. For Karl Marx, religion in Prussia was famously lamented as the “sigh of the oppressed” and the “opium of the people” (McKinnon 2005) which has been widely, but not universally, interpreted as referring to the ways in which locally expressed, institutionalized religion, may play a role in encouraging workers to accept and endure poor conditions and wages on the promise of a better future after death. This function was recognized by workers’ movements in the USA at the beginning of the twentieth century. As such, religion was strongly resented and resisted by groups such as the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW or “Wobblies” as they were known). Their perspective was encapsulated in a song written by union leader Joe Hill, in 1911, titled “*The Preacher and the Slave*” which parodied a traditional hymn with alternative promises of “pie in the sky when you die”. For Weber, religion also played an important role in people’s attitude to work and, less controversially, he ascribed differences in work ethic to differences in religious affiliation.²

Despite arguments by some sociologists that there is only a weak connection between religion and contemporary economic behaviour (Wuthnow and Scott 1997), the influence of Marx and Weber persists today in relation to studies of work and religion (Baum 1980). In recent writing, for example, Uygur et al. (2017) have drawn on Weber's notion of *Lebensführung* to explore the impact of religious beliefs on the work ethic of Turkish small business owners concluding that they are strongly influenced in their practices by Islamic virtues (Uygur et al. 2017). Meanwhile Sullivan's work on the ways in which low-income working mothers draw upon religion for strength and solace in conducting their menial and stressful daily tasks has stronger echoes of the work of Marx. In commenting on faith-based welfare-to-work job-training programmes in the USA she stresses that:

[...] improving conditions in low-skilled jobs should not be ignored in favor of religion making individuals better able to cope with such jobs (Sullivan 2006, 107)

In developing the idea of a connection between religion and economic life, some recent research has focussed on the idea of work-faith integration and the ways in which workers are affected by their faith in relation to their jobs (Lynn, Naughton, and VanderVeen 2009; Walker 2013). In some cases, the benefits of a shared faith are highlighted as critical to the success of an enterprise – for example in relation to diamond trading (Richman 2006) and kibbutzim (Ruffle and Sosis 2003). More generally, however, studies tend to conclude that when workers are able to integrate faith with work, they enjoy more positive life and work outcomes. This leads some authors to advocate greater tolerance of religiosity at work and to emphasize the benefits that can accrue from making it “easier for individuals to identify coreligionists at work thus enhancing the salience of religion” (Weaver and Agle 2002, 93). However, this work seems to be largely focussed on substantially homogeneous cases. How advantageous it is to increase the visibility of religion at work in environments where a variety of religious beliefs are held is under-explored, particularly in a context where harassment on the grounds of religious belief is a source of workplace complaints.

In the USA, complaints filed on the grounds of religious discrimination have more than doubled in the 20 years to 2017 (Cantone and Wiener 2017). This suggests that the public expression of religious identity at work can sometimes create discord, harassment and discrimination. Relatedly, in the United States in multifaith settings, questions have been raised about the consequences of the requirement for employers to accommodate religious beliefs when the impact of such accommodations largely affect other workers and may reduce morale (Flake 2015). The difficulties in achieving a balanced approach in the workplace which takes account of employers' economic interests, the burden of religious accommodation on co-workers, and

the right to freedom of religious expression in the workplace has also been highlighted in the European context (Vickers 2016). A UK Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) study in 2015, highlighted resentment from some workers towards others who were given preferential treatment with regard to choices about time off and access to specially provided multi faith rooms. These issues can be particularly difficult to deal with when the rights of individuals clash. For example, in cases where the observance of rights about gender or sexuality are incompatible with particular interpretations of religious teachings or practices. Adam and Rea (2018) provide examples of this nature in their paper relating to the accommodation of Muslim religious practices in Belgium. In their case study, they identify requests from Muslim employees to change from a female to a male boss and to avoid sharing workspaces with the opposite sex (Adam and Rea 2018, 2719) each of which could have negative implications for the equality of women in the workplace.

Issues of balancing rights and freedoms in religiously heterogenous workplaces are complex and under-explored. This paper fills a gap in the current literature by exploring the practices and beliefs of migrant workers employed in mixed nationality crews on board deep-sea cargo vessels. Such crews generally operate beyond the jurisdiction of their own national legal frameworks when it comes to protections relating to equality and labour rights. They also experience little oversight from shore-based managers in relation to daily life on board. In this context, they constitute a fascinating example of how migrant workers *themselves* may choose to balance religious freedoms and harmonious working relationships in heterogenous, multinational, settings.

Method

The research underpinning this account was undertaken as part of an ESRC-funded project (ES/N019423/1) considering the ways in which multinational groups of workers employed in isolated, residential, settings (at sea) cope with differences in belief. The research considered faith as it is experienced and negotiated on board vessels alongside the provisions for faith and welfare made by charitable organizations based in ports ashore. In order to understand these different dimensions of seafarers' lives we used a combination of qualitative research methods. Non-participant observation and semi-structured interviews were utilized on board two different vessels crewed by individuals from different countries. One ship was owned and operated by an established South East Asian company while the second was owned in China and operated by a shipmanagement company whose central offices are located elsewhere. The length of the combined voyages was 89 days. The vessels were crewed by Chinese, Latvian, Sri Lankan, Swedish, Norwegian, and Filipino seafarers who between them self-affiliated

to eight religions (Buddhism, Baptist Church, Potter's House, Iglesia Filipina Independiente, Jehova's Witness, Jesus Is Lord Church, Lutheran Church, Roman Catholicism) and to atheism. While the vast majority were Roman Catholics each ship displayed a degree of religious diversity (please see [Table 1](#) for details) and we uncovered a considerable range of beliefs held by members of the same religion emphasizing that a single religious affiliation does not represent homogenous belief. Shipboard research was complemented by research in two seafarers' centres ashore. One was run by a major faith-based charity dedicated to seafarers' welfare and one was independent of national organizations but was run by local faith-based charitable organizations dedicated to seafarers' welfare. A total of six months was spent in the two catchment areas served by these organizations undertaking observations in the centres, accompanying workers, chaplains, and volunteers on ship-visits, and carrying out both formal and informal interviews.

While this paper inevitably draws upon the understanding gained in both parts of the study, the underpinning material is substantially drawn from the shipboard element of the research. To facilitate this, we transcribed 55 formal interviews with seafarers and thematically organized the material using NVivo 12. We also coded the fieldnotes which were made in the course of the two voyages. In analysing the data, we initially relied upon a "bottom up" approach establishing codes in line with the major themes which emerged in seafarers' accounts and in the fieldnotes. These were, in turn, driven by the interview guide that we employed which was designed to address our main research questions. We revisited the coding in writing this paper in order to facilitate an analysis which more closely aligned with the literature in the area. This was a largely organizational exercise that improved the ease with which we could process the relevant material.

It was not possible to select ships according to the religious beliefs of the seafarers on board as this information is not known to the crew agents who supply seafarers to vessels, nor to the ship operators or owners. We therefore sought out ships which carried multinational crews. Once we identified companies which employed seafarers in multinational crews we approached them to ask if they would be willing to allow us to undertake shipboard research and if they could identify suitable vessels for us, taking into account our desire to maximize our chances of finding seafarers of different faiths on board and our need to sail on board vessels which did not transit high risk areas (prohibited by the companies and the University ethics committee). Negotiating such access is challenging and we have previously described some of the strategies we employ³ (e.g. Sampson and Turgo 2018). Most seafarers in the international fleet are Filipino and Chinese (BIMCO ICS 2015) and these two major groups are supplemented by Indians, Europeans (who are most frequently officers) and a variety of others. Once on board a vessel, our practice is to negotiate access with individual seafarers stressing the

Table 1. Nationality and religious affiliation of interviewed seafarers.

	Filipino	Chinese	Swedish	Norwegian	Latvian	American	Sri Lankan	Total
Atheist	0	3	0	1	1	1	0	6
Roman Catholic	37	0	0	0	0	0	0	37
Buddhist	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	2
Jesus is Lord	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Iglesia Filipina	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Lutheran	0	0	1	2	0	0	0	3
Baptist Church	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Jehova's Witness	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Potter's House (Christian Pentecostal)	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Total	44	4	1	3	1	1	2	55

voluntary nature of participation. Sailing with seafarers allows us to create strong trust-based relationships which encourage involvement. In relation to this project, all seafarers, bar one, took part in interviews⁴ allowing us to capture the thoughts and views of almost all those on board the selected vessels^{5,6}.

The importance of religion and belief to seafarers on cargo ships

Life on board a cargo ship is universally described by seafarers as challenging (Sampson 2013). Due to the long periods of time which are spent living on board, it is experienced by many seafarers as a sacrifice of life: the exchange of time – of a life – for money. Isolation from communities ashore has the potential to leave seafarers lonely, and vulnerable to abuse, which can result in poor mental health (Sampson and Ellis 2019). Loneliness can be compounded by poor relationships on board particularly at the beginning of a career when seafarers are more vulnerable to bullying and harassment (Gould 2010). At these times, some seafarers described faith as helpful in withstanding difficult emotional shipboard conditions. One seafarer explained how, in his early career as a cadet and third officer (also known as third mate), he encountered several situations where his work colleagues were difficult to get along with and he missed his family terribly. In this context, he found his belief in a God of great solace. He explained that:

When I was a cadet. [...] I really felt the pains of homesickness. And it was made worse by your inconsiderate workmates. Then it happened again when I was already a third mate. Our captain was a genuine pain-in-the-ass. That time I really wanted to sign off at once. [...] When that happened, I was on my own and God was just there, and he's the only one you could talk to. (Roman Catholic, Filipino, Officer⁷)

He was not alone in his difficult early experiences at sea which were described by others in this study and have also been documented elsewhere (Gould 2010). In these situations, seafarers can feel extremely alone, and we uncovered several examples where faith in God was described by seafarers as beneficial. A member of the galley staff told of how:

[...] there are times that you are lonely and all that you can do is to have faith. On my first ship, I struggled hard. I was still learning things and whenever I was [...] back in my cabin, I was thinking, why is this work like this? Then I told myself, I have faith in God; I'll just pray to Him. [...] I was able to finish my contract even though I had a strained relationship with our chief cook. (Roman Catholic, Filipino, Rating)

Prayer and other practices associated with religion were also described by some as helping them to cope with stress and boredom on board. One

seafarer described how meditation and the teachings of Buddha helped him to deal with stress at sea saying:

We seafarers, too much worry, all the time, so Buddha says be calm and don't stress, so that is why we have meditation. It helps. (Buddhist, Chinese, Officer)

Another felt that God helped him to cope with the boredom of a life at sea. He explained how:

[...] religion has a role to play in making life on board bearable in many ways. When you are bored to death of life on board, you are fed up with what you're doing in the lounge, like watching the television, you go to your cabin and pray, you talk to God and then when you are done, you feel refreshed. (Roman Catholic, Filipino, Officer)

These descriptions resonate with those of the workers who Sullivan (2006) interviewed in that they describe how religious practice may serve to mitigate negative aspects of work. However, loneliness, isolation, and institutional living, are not the only challenges that seafarers face on board. Knowing of the dangers that can be encountered at sea, seafarers commonly experience fear. Emergencies at sea are often associated with storms, mechanical failure, collisions and groundings. At these times, some seafarers described praying. For example, one seafarer described fearing for his life and finding strength in his God:

There was one time when for one week the weather was very rough. That was the time when I felt I really needed God because I had nothing to hold on to. Our safety was in the balance. [...] You would not wish to be on board. It's total chaos. I wish I could describe it to you properly. Your cabin looks like it has been ransacked with your things strewn all over the floor. Then there was time when we had a hole in the bow because when the waves hit the anchor it smashed against the bow and it created a hole there. The pump room became flooded as a result of that. We were in the middle of the ocean. Nobody was working anymore aside from those on the bridge and those in the engine room doing some necessary monitoring of the equipment. We just waited for the weather to calm down. [...] All of us were already instructed to wear life vest just in case. I was already prepared for the worst. If there was a call of abandon ship, then I should be ready for it. [...] That was the time when I felt that I really needed God in my life. (Roman Catholic, Filipino, Rating)

In these senses, God was being drawn upon by seafarers to increase their resilience in dealing with stressful and dangerous workplace situations. However, there were also examples in the research, where seafarers had experienced dangerous situations but did not turn to a God or faith for support. Rather, they described focussing on the tasks at hand and sometimes thinking of their families. One seafarer who did believe in a God described an emergency when his focus was entirely on the ship and his responsibilities. He explained:

You know what, quite interestingly, when that was happening, God did not even enter my mind [...] we were just focused on doing what we could to keep the ship safe. It was only after the dust had settled, so to speak, that I found time to thank God that we were able to make it to the port without undue harm to anyone on board. I have the feeling that when we are confronted with situations like what we experienced, we must focus on doing the best thing so that no one gets hurt or properties destroyed and then when it is over, it's all about thanking God for his help. (Roman Catholic, Filipino, Officer)

Another faced with a fire explained how:

Actually I never thought about praying. I just wanted to see where the fire was and help put it out. (Potter's House - Christian Pentecostal, Filipino, Senior Officer)

These comments alert us to the fact that for some seafarers the most appropriate response to an emergency is to focus on practical ways of averting danger and keeping people safe. In this context, it might seem that we should question the extent to which religion mitigates workplace stress and fear. However, closer consideration suggests that the statements may indicate different responses to different emergency scenarios. The evidence suggests that seafarers are more likely to draw on their belief in a God to help them at times when they are powerless to help themselves. In situations where they retain some agency, however, they concentrate on their work duties in order to practically mitigate critical dangers – often remembering to “thank” God for deliverance once the crisis has passed.⁸

Setting aside emergency situations, we found that, more generally, it was relatively common for seafarers to engage in faith-based routines which they hoped would offer them some protection from ill-fate. In some cases, this involved carrying something with totemic significance such as a religious artefact. Several seafarers took a rosary with them to sea and felt comforted that this would protect them as in the following example:

I have a rosary and a novena. I keep my novena in my luggage whereas the rosary is just on the table. Sometimes, when I will do some really challenging work, I carry it in my pocket. Like when I have to be on the bridge for watchkeeping in a busy sea-lane, I take it with me. [...] I look at it as my safe pass, my guidance. God is with me and will keep me safe. (Roman Catholic, Filipino, Rating)

Others took pamphlets and written materials such as religious books and written prayers. The following example is illustrative:

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

These examples serve to strengthen the argument that religion assists seafarers in coping with dangerous and emotionally challenging workplaces. In

some senses, seafarers' faith in the protection of a God lessens the need for employers to further improve safety standards and allows seafarers to repeatedly return to work in settings where they are bored, stressed and fearful.

The private observance of religion on board

Ships are unusual settings. They are institutionalized workspaces which are largely isolated from the world and what is regarded as the "public" sphere of life where political discourse and debate prevail (Habermas 1991). Nevertheless, they cannot be regarded as private in the sense of being "protected from anything other than personal or domestic gaze" (Bailey 2000, 384). They are not spaces which are separated or safeguarded from public control. On board a vessel, the only space where a seafarer may be alone with a degree of privacy is in a cabin. However, even these spaces may be accessed by superiors during routine "cabin inspections", by immigration/customs officials in ports, and by captains at any time in a voyage. However, despite these limitations it is within cabins that seafarers feel freer to express their religious identities. In our research, we found that religious artefacts, icons and literature were largely kept in cabins, or pockets, or somewhere discreet. These things were widely regarded as part of the private lives of seafarers and were not regarded as appropriate for "public" consumption. This resonated with the overwhelming view amongst seafarers that religion was a personal matter to be respected but not usually discussed. Many seafarers, regardless of nationality, firmly adhered to this tenet which was generally picked up from others as part of a process of shipboard socialization into an extremely strong occupational culture which prioritizes work over personal matters (Gould 2010). It serves to prevent conflict on board which generally gives rise to serious consequences for seafarers ranging from physical/psychological harm to dismissal and the loss of a future livelihood. Many seafarers explained how religion was not usually discussed on board. The following comments from seafarers of Filipino, Chinese, and Swedish nationality, respectively, are illustrative:

We don't really talk much about religion on-board [...] when people talk about religion, it could turn nasty. (Roman Catholic, Filipino, Officer)

[...] No incident like that, you know fighting or talking loud about religion, debate, nothing. [...], nothing like that. [...] we work on board to make money. We not come for trouble. So for religion, I don't think this on board a problem. You see, this ship – Second Engineer, he said no Christmas party for me – okay ... we respect, we not say you must come together with us. (Atheist, Chinese, Senior Officer)

[...] religion, politics, they are the two subjects you actually never should discuss on board. [...] Believe me, there will be no resolution and you will just end up

angry and frustrated. [...] Just an unspoken rule. [...] I don't explicitly tell everyone what not to talk about. I don't do that. And I think majority of seafarers, if not all, they know that religion is a contentious topic so I don't think I need to tell them about it. (Lutheran Church, Swedish, Senior Officer)

While it might appear that seafarers who shared a faith might have been more comfortable talking to one another about beliefs, and we found examples of seafarers who in the course of their career had experienced one or two in depth conversations with others⁹ such discussions were also regarded cautiously. As one seafarer pointed out:

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

On the relatively rare occasions when comments about religion were made, and were found to be offensive, seafarers generally tried to either laugh them off or let them go over their head. As in the following case:

I used to work with some Born Again Christians, and I would hear them saying that Roman Catholics should not be praying to images, say of Christ and Saints. You see, even if I am a Baptist, I still attend masses in Roman Catholic churches. And I still do what Roman Catholics do. When I heard that, I just let it pass. [...] I don't want to pick a fight with anyone on board. (Baptist Church, Filipino, Rating)

However, if seafarers observed such situations and felt that they were going to lead to conflict they would do their best to intervene. One described how:

There will be a quarrel especially when the discussion is between a follower of Iglesia and a Roman Catholic, just the two of them. So we need to stop them I think ... [...]. (Iglesia Filipina Independiente, Filipino, Rating)

In these ways, although seafarers largely regarded the vessel as a place where significant political or religious discourse should not occur, there was tolerance of infringements of these occupational cultural norms combined with efforts to diffuse resultant negative outcomes.

Despite efforts to accommodate the religious views of others, when and where they were manifested, there were a small number of examples of situations where seafarers outlined the limits of their tolerance of religious differences on board. Such limits were generally associated with situations where seafarers expected different treatment because of religion. Resentments seemed most likely to arise in relation to galley staff. One seafarer described his displeasure at having to increase his working hours to accommodate the needs of Muslim officers on board a previous vessel.¹⁰ He explained that:

[...] We adjust to the needs and wants of the Big 4 [term applied to four most senior officers on board]. For instance, with a previous ship, there were Muslims on board so when it is Ramadan, they only eat after 9 pm. But you

see, our work is only until 7 pm. [...] We adjust to their needs because the captain was there and also the chief engineer and other Muslim crew. You see, we can't break their tradition. We need to adjust to them because they are senior officers. They are our boss. [...] so we can't do anything. (Roman Catholic, Filipino, Rating)

A senior officer summed up a common "management" view that while some steps might be taken on board to adapt to the religious/cultural needs of others these were limited, and should not impinge too much on shipmates. He suggested that if seafarers couldn't accept such limitations then they should really go home. He put it this way:

Well, you do it [religion] privately. Or I don't mind if you do it in the lounge but not during break time when others are using it. Maybe on Sunday. It depends, you can be as much of a Catholic or whatever you want to be but don't bother everybody else with it, I think that is the general impression really. Keep it to yourself. [...] You see, on board, you do a bit of sacrifice. We can't cater to the needs of everyone. if you feel your religion is violated, leave. Find another job! (Lutheran Church, Norwegian, Senior Officer)

The avoidance of conflict was a major motivation in keeping religion private but there were others too. Some seafarers described how they did not want to be held to account for engagement in religiously proscribed behaviours. Many seafarers described how the hardships and privations of life at sea led them to feel entitled to engage in behaviours which they would not enact at home.¹¹ These included, for example, drinking alcohol, eating meat, and engaging in commercial sex. One seafarer described how:

I drink sometime, yes, it's okay. I need to enjoy from time to time. Life at sea is difficult, different from land, you see. But I told [you] when I go home I don't drink. (Buddhist, Sri Lankan, Senior Officer)

Another explained a common attitude to commercial sex when he said:

[...] in New Zealand, there were no brothels to visit but if we were in Brazil, I am pretty sure, I would go to one. [...] I don't feel anything, no remorse. The important thing is I am happy after doing it. [...] I want to enjoy life. Our work is difficult. I don't feel any guilt, whatsoever, I don't even think about it. (Roman Catholic, Filipino, Rating)

While some described a feeling of guilt associated with some of these activities and others avoided them steadfastly, many alluded to a sense of being free of community surveillance at sea, particularly when they were the only member of a particular nationality, or religion, on board. In this very particular sense, ships and working at sea seemed to offer seafarers a feeling of occupying spaces that were liminal and therefore permissive of behaviours that would be regarded as socially transgressive in their respective land-based communities. In this way, their experience of being at sea is like the experiences of tourists occupying similarly liminal spaces (Pritchard and Morgan

2006; Preston-Whyte 2004). The following three examples are illustrative of the ways in which seafarers expressed this feeling:

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

There are no [religious] restrictions [at sea]. We can eat and do what we want. I remember on one of my ships, there was even roast pig because on one of the days of the holy week [when we wouldn't normally eat meat] was when our captain celebrated his birthday. So we had a party. (Roman Catholic, Filipino, Rating)

When I had sex with a prostitute [...] as a seafarer I think it is okay, as long as you don't do it back home in the Philippines.[...] Well, being a seafarer I think is different. I don't know. We work very hard so it's understandable that we will do it, and in our case, we don't have our wives or girlfriends with us, so maybe, we are excluded from rules, I don't know. Maybe it is a sin but God maybe will understand us. (Roman Catholic, Filipino, Rating)

In this context, many felt that they would be identified as hypocritical to talk too publicly about their religious beliefs when deviating from the kinds of behaviours identified with piety ashore. They generally avoided reprimanding others for deviant behaviours and they occasionally described how they deviated from their own standards of behaviour just to be seen to fit in with the more free and easy behaviour of colleagues. One seafarer explained:

I join the crew when they have a party. In fact, I should not be drinking at all. It's very wrong. In fact, regardless of requests and enticements, I should be saying "no". I just ask forgiveness from God that He may understand why I am doing this. I don't want my mates to think that I am a snob and that I am not a joiner. They could be poke fun at me, saying for instance that I am playing the role of a Saint for refusing to consume liquor. What I do, if I could, is when I am offered a drink, I drink a bit then I make it a point to stop drinking after my first and second gulp and then I make an excuse of going to the toilet and then come back with my bottle empty. Then I will refuse another bottle of beer if, and when, offered. (Baptist Church, Filipino, Rating)

In these ways, seafarers seemed to cultivate an occupational culture which not only prioritized work above personal matters but also encouraged acceptance on board. This was extended to people of other religions, as a matter of course, but it was also extended to seafarers of shared nationality and religion

who, whilst on board, chose not to behave in accordance with the religious teachings which they observed at home.

Religion in multinational workspaces – reflecting on the example of seafarers

For a number of reasons, the example of migrant seafarers is interesting when considering debates about work and religion. Seafarers work in small groups in institutionalized and stressful contexts. They share a confined environment with colleagues from other countries, and of other faiths, day and night for many months, and they have very limited contact with their families and friends ashore. In this context, they have arrived at their own ways of managing religion and religious difference without a great deal of interference from shore-side management and beyond national legal frameworks. This makes the example of seafarers particularly revealing in terms of what works for multi-faith groups of people at the “chalk face” and how, when left to their own devices, they manage and deal with religious rights and differences.

While, in this strongly work-oriented environment, we did not uncover evidence of a relationship between different religions and work-ethic (one strand of thought in economic sociology), the research did demonstrate that many seafarers drew strongly upon their relationship with a God, or upon religious practices (such as meditation), in order to deal with the stresses associated with working at sea. These stresses were often associated with difficult relationships with colleagues and seniors. In this sense, seafarers had a great deal in common with the low-income working mothers described by Sullivan who drew on their faith to cope with stress at work especially in relation to dealing with difficult supervisors and customers (Sullivan 2006, 104).

However, despite the importance of faith to many seafarers, there appeared to be no appetite for increased religiosity at sea. On the contrary, seafarers took great care to ensure that religion and faith remained largely private on board while being concerned not to entirely prohibit a limited public expression of faith. There seemed to be consensus that religion should not interfere with work practices and where, on rare occasions, it was allowed to do so, it produced a degree of antipathy. This seems to confirm observations that where provision for faith-based needs at work involves inconvenience to colleagues it can produce resentment (Flake 2015; Vickers 2016). In the highly conflict-averse environment at sea, we found that an occupational culture which discouraged ideas about entitlement to special provisions on board was strongly prevalent. Concomitantly, we did not find strong evidence that seafarers found that the identification of co-religionists on board assisted them in finding meaning in their work. While religious beliefs could underpin practices which provided seafarers with considerable solace on board, these activities were mostly privately

observed. In this sense, the research findings do not support the idea that in a multifaith context greater integration of religion and work would be regarded by employees as positive.

Conclusion

The research indicates that in multifaith settings workers may prefer to maintain a degree of privacy in relation to their beliefs. Seafarers are strongly incentivised to avoid conflict on board as the outcomes of discord can be highly deleterious potentially impacting on both health (physical or mental) and livelihood. In this context, they have developed a range of strategies to protect themselves and their colleagues. The occupational culture which prevails on cargo ships heavily prioritizes work, and related matters, over personal issues of any description and this is of benefit to seafarers in negotiating the pitfalls that might otherwise de-rail efforts to create a harmonious atmosphere on board. In navigating the different religious currents that characterize a multinational crew, seafarers appear to have successfully learnt how to balance the rights of individuals to freedom of religious expression with the demands of work.

This research took place in a multifaith context. On the surface this would appear to be a limitation that restricts the relevance of the findings to similar workplaces. However, in the course of our work we did note the different interpretations placed on religious teaching by members of the same faith. Seafarers themselves noted that this was the case and that it had the potential to be a source of conflict. In other contexts, where workers share a religion, they are likely to similarly interpret religion individually and such differences may sometimes be as significant within shared-faith groups as they are between some groups of different faiths. This would suggest that it would be a mistake to entirely discount the relevance of these findings in other, more superficially homogenous, workplace settings where workers may nevertheless hold diverse beliefs.

Notes

1. Now surpassed in size by sister vessel *Symphony of the Seas*.
2. We acknowledge that various interpretations of the work of Weber and Marx are in the public domain and cannot be discussed adequately in this paper which merely seeks to reference them by way of introductory context.
3. Sampson and Turgo are both based at the Seafarers International Research Centre and have spent many years undertaking shipboard fieldwork in relation to a variety of projects.
4. In broad terms the semi structured interview schedules covered: seafarers' beliefs; their experiences in relation to religious expression on board; their needs and associated provision; the importance of faith; chaplaincy services; religious practices on board and ashore.

5. Interviews were conducted in private spaces on board on a one to one basis.
6. NB the number of interviews reflects the fact that there were some crew changes in the course of the voyages.
7. The position of seafarers in the occupational hierarchy is denoted in ascending order with the labels "rating", "officer" and "senior officer".
8. NB Officers may have more responsibility for mitigating danger, but such agency is not exclusive to officers.
9. And limited experiences of voluntary shipboard bible study.
10. Galley crew work from 06.00.
11. At home many Roman Catholic and Christian seafarers described regular church attendance and a variety of pious activities associated with membership of a church. In contrast, whilst at sea, and even when ashore during shore-leave most showed little inclination to engage in devout activities or church attendance.

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