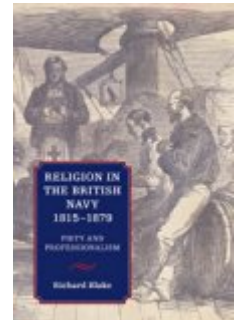


**Richard Blake.** *Religion in the British Navy, 1815-1879: Piety and Professionalism..*  
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Richard Blake's *Religion in the British Navy, 1815-1879* looks at the influence of evangelicalism and evangelicals on the culture of the Royal Navy. The book is a follow-up to the author's earlier *Evangelicals in the Royal Navy, 1775-1815* (2008), which described the development of small pockets of evangelical faith in the Royal Navy of the Napoleonic Wars. In this volume, Blake argues that the mores and culture of the Victorian Royal Navy are impossible to comprehend without understanding the impact of evangelicalism, which "came to modify and refine the ethos of the high Victorian navy" (p. 12).

The book is organized roughly chronologically, with sections detailing evangelicalism immediately after the Napoleonic Wars, its rise in mid-century, and its effects on the navy at the zenith of its influence. Within each section, Blake provides thematic chapters on subjects like the relationship of evangelicalism to the navy's resolutely Anglican chaplains or the impact of evangelical thought and behavior on RN expeditions to the arctic. Along the way, the author's deep research

manifests itself in a number of vignettes and asides. This structure highlights Blake's formidable research, but at times, the thematic chapters threaten to overwhelm the chronological thrust of his argument.

At the start of Blake's narrative, evangelicals were tolerated in the navy, but hardly welcomed, and evangelical officers faced difficulties finding positions and promotions in the smaller postwar fleet. At the same time, many sailors were influenced by the burgeoning evangelical movement in ports and merchant shipping. In these areas, nonconformist pastors—often aided by half-pay officers—created ministries aimed towards sailors and developed an archipelago of institutions like sailors' homes that provided food, shelter, and moral instruction to sailors ashore.

The Royal Navy's slow embrace of evangelicalism started with the realization that these institutions provided sorely needed services to sailors, and that their values could benefit the navy. The evangelical message could aid the Royal Navy in

areas like “discipline ... alcohol abuse ... health, education, [and] sexual behavior” (p. 67). Simply put, pious sailors were easier to manage and more trustworthy. These traits were especially valuable in a service that increasingly relied on well-trained sailors managing complicated machinery. After initial misgivings, the Royal Navy encouraged these views by revamping its chaplain corps, mandating attendance at prayers, and expanding access to bibles and religious tracts. Chaplains remained Anglican, but their ethos, and Blake argues, the ethos of the service, reflected low church and nonconformist evangelical practice.

By the 1860s and 1870s, Blake argues, evangelical piety permeated the Royal Navy ashore, on the lower deck, and in the wardroom, even if the majority of sailors and officers were not themselves fervent evangelicals. Not only did these attitudes affect how sailors lived, but Blake argues that evangelical beliefs determined how they viewed their profession and mission. For example, Blake notes that Royal Navy polar explorers and surveyors often couched their goals in religious terms, and utilized religion to bolster morale. Blake also points to the alliance between missionaries and naval officers in subduing the West African slave trade.

Blake’s basic argument is convincing and well supported. The reader will come away from *Religion and the British Navy* with a heightened understanding of evangelicalism and its impact on the Royal Navy. Unsurprisingly, the book is at its strongest when explaining the mechanics of evangelical influence in service. His research is impressively thorough, and he is adept at parsing theological debates for the nonspecialist and tracing networks of evangelicals in and outside of the service.

However, the book is marred by Blake’s eagerness to highlight evangelicalism’s effect on every aspect of the Royal Navy. For the most part, Blake uses David Bebbington’s “quadrilateral” of

biblicism, crucicentrism, conversionism, and activism to define evangelicalism, and recognizes that only a minority of sailors met these criteria. Towards the end, however, he argues that evangelicals “Christianized” (p. 241) the British navy—a curious claim to make about a country with an established church, and a service already infused with what Blake calls a “robust Anglicanism.” Through this questionable assertion, Blake credits evangelicalism for displays of standard Christian piety in the service from the late nineteenth century through the two world wars. Here, Blake goes beyond his evidence and implicitly marginalizes other strains of British religiosity.

Even if Blake is unable to prove some of his more grandiose claims, the book is quite useful as a record of evangelicalism in the Victorian Royal Navy. If the reader can overlook Blake’s overenthusiasm there is much of value in this book. As Blake notes, evangelicalism played an outsized role in the navy of the day, and this book provides a solid account of its influence. Although *Religion in the Royal Navy* has its issues, it is a valuable resource for all of those who study the service in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

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