

‘Mass Anywhere on Sea or Land’: Catholicism and the Royal Navy, 1901–1906

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Abstract

Before the First World War, the law stated that only Anglican clergy could perform religious services aboard British warships; clergy of other denominations were, other than in exceptional circumstances, barred from undertaking this role. For a brief period at the start of the twentieth century an informal and unpublicized attempt was made to circumvent this requirement and provide Catholic sailors with access to their own priests at sea. The reasons for this policy, how it operated and why it ended are explored in this article.

Keywords

Royal Navy, chaplains, Roman Catholicism

The literature on religion within the British army in the run-up to and during the First World War is a well-developed and increasingly sophisticated one. In recent years detailed studies have been undertaken on the administrative and organizational side of army spiritual life; on the provision of clergy to front-line forces, be they from the established Anglican Church, from other protestant denominations or from the Roman Catholic community; and on the experience of military chaplains in peace and war.¹

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- 1 See Edward Madigan, *Faith under Fire: Anglican Army Chaplains in the Great War* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011); Michael Snape, *God and the British Soldier: Religion and the British Army in the First and Second World Wars* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005); Michael Snape, *The Royal Army Chaplains' Department 1796–1953: Clergy Under Fire* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2008); Michael Snape and Edward Madigan (eds), *The Clergy in Khaki: New Perspectives on British Army Chaplaincy in the First World War* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013); James Hagerty, *Priests in Uniform: Catholic Chaplains to the Forces in the First World War* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2017). There is also a literature on army chaplains in other countries. See, for example, Patrick Houlihan, 'Imperial Frameworks of Religion: Catholic Military Chaplains of Germany and Austria-Hungary during the First World War', *First World War Studies* III (2012), pp. 165–82.

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Adding to their lustre, these studies are grounded in an impressive body of sources that range from official government papers and ecclesiastical documents through to the private and personal reflections of army chaplains ministering in the field and the accounts of the officers and soldiers that served alongside them and interacted with them. Thus, for religion in the Army there is a wide-ranging and thorough historiography that covers the period before and during the First World War and does so from an extensive source base that allows for an assessment of both the higher administrative angle and the perspective of popular front-line experience.² Disappointingly, however, the same is not true for the current literature on religious ministration in the early twentieth century Royal Navy. While studies of the spiritual life on board the nation's warships in this era do exist, in contrast to the spate of recent publications on the Army, most of these are dated works, based largely on published sources, and while, in theory, assessing the entire chronological span from the mid nineteenth century through to the close of the First World War, they elide over much of this period for want of first-hand information.³ The result is that for the crucial decade and a half before the outbreak of the First World War, a period when reform might have been expected, these studies, insofar as they cover it at all, simply repeat well-known, but not necessarily well-grounded, truisms about the era. This is particularly evident when it comes to the provision of spiritual succour to Catholic sailors, a subject that not only brings religion in the Navy to the fore but raises further important questions about social policy and marginalized groups. The standard interpretation consistently advanced is one of official prejudice, indifference, and neglect. According to almost all accounts, in contrast to the Army, which appointed paid officiating Catholic chaplains from the mid-1830s, the Admiralty, despite regular entreaties from the Catholic hierarchies in both England and Ireland, refused outright to appoint Catholic clergy to its ships and took no meaningful steps to enable Catholic sailors to worship freely.⁴ While there is certainly some truth in these accusations, it is an incomplete picture written largely from one side, that of the complainants. However, seen from the Admiralty's perspective the situation was considerably more complex. There were constitutional, legal, and practical issues that governed the response of the naval leadership to the requests for further spiritual provision for Catholic sailors

2 The lived experience of Catholic sailors on the lower deck is not easy to gauge as we are largely dependent upon the existence of diaries, letters or oral interviews to provide evidence of this. Sadly, these are in short supply and, where they survive, often say little on this issue.

3 Anson devotes five pages to the early twentieth century. Peter F. Anson, *The Church and the Sailor: A Survey of the Sea-Apostolate Past and Present* (London: John Gifford, 1948), pp. 181–5. Smith's study of the nineteenth century is based on detailed archive work, but his examination of the early twentieth century is not. Waldo E. Smith, *The Navy Chaplain and his Parish* (Ottawa: Queen's Printer, 1967), pp. 114–5. Taylor discusses the First World War experience of Catholic Chaplains, but offers no insights into their peace-time service. Gordon Taylor, *The Sea Chaplains: A History of the Chaplains of the Royal Navy* (Oxford: Oxford Illustrated Press, 1978), pp. 340–2. Johnstone and Hagerty devote three pages to the decades before the First World War, during which a jump is made from 1900 to 1907 without covering the years in-between. Tom Johnstone and James Hagerty, *The Cross on the Sword: Catholic Chaplains in the Forces*, (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1996), pp. 47–9.

4 Hagerty, *Priests in Uniform*, pp. 1–2.

and, contrary to what is said in the current literature, there was some desire on the part of the naval authorities to meet the claims for additional Catholic services. Going beyond existing studies, this article fills the current gap in the literature by outlining, based on never previously used Admiralty documents, the institutional barriers that hindered efforts to enhance spiritual provision for Catholic sailors and shows for the very first time that, contrary to what has always been thought, attempts were made by the Board of Admiralty to circumvent these constraints and meet the religious requirements of the Navy's Catholic servicemen. The policy that resulted, which is currently entirely unexamined, belies the dominant caricature of an uncaring and prejudiced senior service. Furthermore, it not only makes a contribution to our understanding of the social history of the Royal Navy, thereby revealing how complex organizations like the Admiralty functioned, but, in addition, it also demonstrates that even an institution normally counted as among the most religiously doctrinaire and inflexible parts of the British establishment, was endeavouring at the outset of the twentieth century to embrace the reformist tendencies of the day. As such it adds to our understanding of religious difference in British national life.

I

Before 1914 the Royal Navy was a predominantly Anglican institution. Not only did some three quarters of the sailors and an even greater proportion of the officers identify as belonging to the Church of England, but the articles of war, the provisions governing the conduct of members of the Royal Navy, as incorporated in the various iterations of the Naval Discipline Act, mandated a strictly Anglican ethos.⁵ Indeed, the very first of the articles proclaimed that aboard ship there would be a complete monopoly for the established religion. As the text ran:

All Officers in command of His Majesty's ships of war shall cause the public worship of Almighty God according to the liturgy of the Church of England established by law to be solemnly, orderly, and reverently performed in their respective ships, and shall take care that prayers and preaching, by the chaplains in Holy Orders of the respective ships, be performed diligently, and that the Lord's Day be observed according to law.⁶

The implication of this was clear: it was a legal requirement not only that all of the religious services performed on British naval vessels were of the Anglican rite, but, additionally, that all of the chaplains that administered them were ordained members of the Anglican Church. Admittedly, in accordance with the increasingly latitudinarian spirit of the times, ever greater efforts were made by the British naval authorities to cater to the religious needs of those sailors who adhered to other Christian denominations. However, this was manifested in very specific ways. Funding, for example, was provided

5 Minute by W. Stuart Harris, Chaplain of the Fleet, 13 February 1902, Admiralty Papers, ADM 1/7507, The National Archives, London (TNA). For background, see Richard Blake, *Religion in the British Navy, 1818–1879: Piety and Professionalism* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2014).

6 The text here is from a Memorandum by Sir Evan MacGregor, 23 July 1906, ADM 1/7814, TNA.

to ensure that Catholic and Protestant Nonconformist sailors would have access to their own clergy when ashore. At various naval ports in Britain and overseas across the wider empire, Catholic priests and Presbyterian and Wesleyan ministers were engaged either on fixed salaries or on variable capitation payments – that is remuneration dependent upon the numbers in the congregation – to provide for the spiritual welfare of their co-religionists. However, the key point was that these ministrations could only ever take place on dry land; they would never occur on the decks of the nation's commissioned warships.⁷ Lest there be any doubt on this stipulation, on 27 February 1894, the Admiralty issued a confidential letter (L.10979, No.182) restating the legal position that 'no services other than authorised by the 1st Article of War are to be held on board any of H.M. Ships.'⁸

For Presbyterian and Wesleyan sailors the inability to seek the support of their own clergy when at sea was certainly an irritant, but, given the shared Protestantism of their own churches and the Church of England, temporary reliance on the ministrations of an Anglican chaplain, while not always ideal, did not throw up insuperable theological problems. The situation was quite different for the Navy's Catholics. For them, the administration of the sacraments by their own clergy, especially at times of sickness or when they were close to death, was a religious imperative, one that could not be met by the presence of an Anglican chaplain. Consequently, in the decades before 1914, the Catholic hierarchy made urgent and repeated representations to the Admiralty to allow Catholic Priests to serve aboard the country's warships. They were to be largely disappointed. True, in 1878 the Navy did make one seemingly significant concession. In June of that year, W. H. Smith, the First Lord of the Admiralty, issued a minute that proclaimed:

My Lords direct that when a large number of ships forming a Squadron are sent on any service that would keep them for a considerable time away from a port where the services of a Roman Catholic Priest would be available, arrangements are to be made for one to accompany the squadron.⁹

However, despite appearances, this was not a promise to allow Catholic clergy to minister aboard warships. First, the concept of a Catholic priest being permitted 'to accompany the squadron' could and generally was taken to mean embarking a priest on a depot ship or a transport, not accommodating him on a man-of-war. Thus, while said priest would certainly be with the squadron, he would not actually be part of the squadron and, thus, might not be available to administer the last rites in a combat situation or other emergency aboard ship. Second, the words 'large number of ships forming a Squadron' and 'would keep them for a considerable time away from a port' were imprecise phrases open to wide interpretation. From the issuing of the minute through to the

7 As Laura Rowe has shown, this had advantages for the personnel concerned. While Anglican sailors stayed aboard ship for their weekly service, their dissenting counterparts got 'a pleasant trip ashore once a week'. Laura Rowe, *Morale and Discipline in the Royal Navy during the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2018), p. 229.

8 The papers relating to this are in ADM 1/7227, TNA.

9 Board Minute, June 1878. ADM 1/6844, TNA.

end of the nineteenth century, they were never interpreted in such a manner as to lead to a Catholic priest going to sea to minister directly to Britain's Catholic sailors aboard the warships on which they served, leaving Catholic sailors without any spiritual succour.¹⁰ Unsurprisingly, this was a deeply unsatisfactory outcome from the Catholic point of view and led Catholic members of Parliament and the Catholic ecclesiastical hierarchy in Britain regularly to seek redress from the Admiralty, the solution proposed by them always being to embark Catholic priests in naval vessels and allow them to minister to Catholic sailors. Yet, though frequently and eloquently made, such pleas were consistently refused. Not only was it argued that such a concession would be illegal, but it was also felt that it would set a dangerous precedent and produce undesirable outcomes. As the Senior Naval Lord, Sir Frederick Richards, explained in January 1898:

Once a status is given *in the Fleet* to the Ministers of any Denomination other than of the Church of England established by law, the whole fabric upon which the religious service of the Fleet is built would come down by the run, and the Fleet would become a theatre for sectarian rivalry.¹¹

Nevertheless, despite these rebuffs, in the wake of their success in extolling Catholic loyalty and highlighting Catholic exploits during the Second South African War, the Catholic hierarchy kept trying.¹² Thus, in September 1903, then in July 1906 and again in March and November 1909 the Catholic Archbishop of Westminster or his representative formally requested that Catholic priests be attached to British warships. He was turned every time. Only with the outbreak of the First World War, a conflict that naturally created a real danger of Catholic sailors getting wounded or killed at sea, did the Anglican monopoly aboard ship finally begin to break down.¹³

Thus, as can be seen, in the thirty-six years that passed between W. H. Smith's theoretical, but, as it transpired, largely empty promise that Catholic clergy might accompany

10 There is some suggestion in the historiography that a Catholic priest accompanied the Mediterranean Squadron in 1888. The idea seems to originate with Anson (Anson, *The Church and the Sailor*, p. 181). It was also made, albeit for the year 1887, in an article in *The Tablet* (C. D. Fay, 'R. C. Chaplains R. N.: An Historical Account', *The Tablet*, 12 October 1957, p. 307) Leaving aside the fact that accompanying a squadron and saying mass are not the same, there are reasons to doubt this. Anson's exact wording is that 'During the troubles in Crete during the year 1888, Admiral Sir Gerard Noel, Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Squadron ... appointed a Catholic priest of independent means to accompany the fleet as Catholic Chaplain.' Unfortunately, in 1888 the Commander-in-Chief in the Mediterranean was the Duke of Edinburgh. Noel, a captain, was serving in the training squadron and was not involved in the difficulties in Crete. He did play a role on that island a decade later, at which point he was second in command, the Commander-in-Chief being Sir John Hopkins. These cumulative factual errors render Anson's unsupported assertion problematic.

11 Minute by Richards, 11 January 1898, ADM 1/7328, TNA.

12 T. Denman, 'Irish Politics and the British Army List: The Formation of the Irish Guards in 1900', *Irish Sword* XIX (1995), pp. 171–86; Michael Snape, 'British Catholicism and the British Army in the First World War', *Recusant History* XXVI (2002), p. 317.

13 Matthew S. Seligmann, *Rum, Sodomy, Prayers and the Lash Revisited: Winston Churchill and Social Reform in the Royal Navy, 1900–1915* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2018), pp. 131–7.

squadrons to sea and the outbreak of the First World War, the British naval authorities refused numerous entreaties to amend the formally proclaimed policy enshrined in both the Articles of War and the Naval Discipline Act that aboard British naval vessels only Anglican chaplains could offer religious ministrations and only Anglican services could be held. It took the advent of total war – two, in fact – to produce any serious and lasting change. At least, that is how the situation is presented in the current historiography.¹⁴ However, as this article will show, this was not actually the case: rather, for a few years beginning in March 1901 a different and, in the context of three decades of outright refusal, somewhat unexpected divergence from this approach was temporarily sanctioned. As will be explained below, for a few brief and tantalising years the Admiralty actively experimented with a more flexible course of action. While theoretically remaining immovable regarding the maintenance of the formally proclaimed policy of an Anglican monopoly aboard ship, the naval hierarchy sought in practice to devolve the management of Catholic religious ministrations to the commanders-in-chief of Britain's many fleets and squadrons. By giving these officers leave to exercise their individual judgment over how the spiritual needs of Catholic sailors would be met in the ships under their command, the Board of Admiralty knowingly and deliberately created circumstances in which Catholic priests might, through local decisions to which the central authorities were not privy and of which they were blissfully and intentionally unaware, find themselves embarked upon British naval vessels and, once there, put in a position where they might be able to conduct services according to their own rites.

II

The genesis of the Admiralty's unexpected change of tack appears to lie in a sustained and well-coordinated agitation for reform instigated in the first half of 1901 by Catholic politicians acting alongside the Irish Catholic clergy, whose interest reflected the high number of Catholic sailors who were of Irish origin. The opening salvo was fired on Friday 22 February by William Redmond, the Member of Parliament for Clare East and a leading light in the Irish Parliamentary Party, who stood up in the House of Commons to ask the government what steps had recently been taken with reference to providing Roman Catholic Priests for the Navy.¹⁵ This line of inquiry was developed further the following Tuesday by Edward McFadden, the Member for Donegal East. He first drew attention to

the Pastoral Letter of the Archbishops and Bishops of Ireland, assembled in National Synod at Maynooth last year, in which they complained that though Roman Catholic sailors were required to go to every quarter of the globe and to be ready at all times to fight, no Roman Catholic priest is allowed to accompany them, and no proper provision is made for the practise of their religion ...

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- 14 While noting that Catholic disabilities ashore were largely eroded in the nineteenth century without similar developments at sea, most texts that cover the question of spiritual ministrations to Catholic sailors have little else to say. The first decade of the twentieth century is a particularly marked gap. See, for example, Hagerty, *Priests in Uniform*, pp. 278–81.
- 15 The Admiralty's copy with the notes on how to reply is in ADM 1/7507, TNA.

Then, on the basis of this occurrence, he pressed the Government to 'take immediate steps to remedy this state of things by appointing Roman Catholic chaplains sufficient for the spiritual requirements of the Roman Catholics at present serving in His Majesty's Navy.'¹⁶ Further interventions along similar lines were made on 11 March 1901 by Michael Joyce, the MP for Limerick, and on 21 March 1901 by John O'Dowd, the MP for Sligo South. As if this were not enough, following this flurry of pointed parliamentary questions, advantage was taken of the passage through the Commons of the 1901–2 Navy Estimates to give the issue further momentum. Several members spoke with passion on the topic during the debates and not merely from the Irish nationalist benches. Additionally, a new factor was introduced through a well-judged intervention by Patrick Power, who represented the seat of East Waterford. As he explained to the assembled MPs: 'The Catholic Bishop of Waterford had recently said that if no action was taken by the authorities he should think it his duty to use his influence with the young men in that district to prevent them joining the Naval Reserve, and he would be perfectly justified in so doing.'¹⁷ The Admiralty would soon discover that this proposal, which echoed the anti-enlistment tactics employed by nationalists in Ireland to deter Irish recruitment to the British army, was no idle threat.¹⁸

On 1 April 1901, Charles Goodfellow, a naval recruiting officer at the Coast Guard station on the Mouth of Boyne, applied to Father John Curry, the parish priest of St Mary's church, Drogheda, asking for a character reference for Peter Leonard, one of his parishioners, who had applied to join the Navy as a stoker. The response he received was alarmingly uncooperative. 'I respectfully decline to encourage or assist any young man in joining His Majesty's Navy until proper regulations for the attendance by a priest on Catholic sailors come into effect or are resolved upon.'¹⁹ Naturally concerned by the implications of this refusal, enquiries were made by the divisional officer in Dundalk as to the cause. These revealed that the local Catholic hierarchy, in the form of Cardinal Logue, had 'had a notice read in the chapels in this diocese that boys were not to join the Navy until priests were carried in men-of-war ...'²⁰ In his report to the Admiral Superintendent of Naval Reserves, the district captain, noting the recent fall in applicants, speculated that this 'may possibly be one of the reasons why the number of recruits in Ireland has not lately come up to the usual number.'²¹ In fact, as events would subsequently show, the reach of this campaign would extend beyond Ireland. In July 1902, Walter Samuel Andrews, a Marine sergeant who was recruiting for the Royal Navy in Liverpool, discovered that some Catholic priests in this English city,

16 The Admiralty's copy is in *ibid.*

17 House of Commons Debates, 23 March 1901 vol. 91 c.1018.

18 Patrick Callan, 'Ambivalence towards the Saxon Shilling: The Attitudes of the Catholic Church in Ireland towards Enlistment during the First World War', *Archivium Hibernicum* XLI (1986), pp. 99–111; Terence Denman, "'The Red Livery of Shame": The Campaign against Army Recruitment in Ireland, 1899–1914', *Irish Historical Studies* XXIX (1994), pp. 208–33; Peter Karsten, 'Irish Soldiers in the British Army, 1792–1922: Suborned or Subordinate?', *Journal of Social History* XVII (1983), p. 47.

19 Curry to Goodfellow, 4 April 1901, ADM 1/7536, TNA.

20 Lowry Armstrong to Captain Gresley, no date [stamped 14 April 1901]. *Ibid.*

21 Gresley to Noel, 18 April 1901. *Ibid.*

having received the circular from the Catholic bishops in Ireland enjoining priests to do all in their power to prevent Catholic men and boys from joining the Navy, were also refusing to provide character references for their parishioners.²² While it was not clear how much of an impact this would have, this was clearly an unwelcome development.

Meanwhile, pressure from the agitation continued to mount in other ways. In May activity shifted to the fourth estate. The *Irish Daily Independent* provided space for Arthur Moore, a prominent Irish Catholic campaigner, Papal count and former MP for Londonderry City to vent on the question of naval chaplains. In the columns of their pages, Moore chastised the government for inaction and dishonesty. ‘Nothing solid has been achieved,’ he complained, ‘no real change has taken place. The Government have made payments to priests at a number of new places ... But substantially the position remains the same.’ His particular grievance was that ‘the Government has refused to grant sea-going chaplains to accompany each squadron; has neglected to carry out the terms of their own minute of the year 1878.’²³

Moore’s complaint was not the end of the matter. In June at the annual meeting of the Irish Catholic hierarchy in Maynooth a resolution was passed condemning the prohibition on Catholic chaplains aboard naval vessels and calling on the parents of Roman Catholic children not to allow their offspring to join the navy until suitable provision for their spiritual welfare aboard ship had been made. The impact of this measure was amplified when on 1 July 1901 two Irish nationalist MPs, William Delany (Queen’s County Ossory) and James Daly (Monaghan South) took the opportunity provided by this resolution to press the Admiralty to take steps to attach Roman Catholic priests to Royal Navy warships.²⁴

With the First Lord of the Admiralty, Lord Selborne, sitting in the House of Lords, the task of addressing these points in the House of Commons fell to Hugh Oakeley Arnold-Forster, the Parliamentary and Financial Secretary to the Admiralty. His initial inclination was merely to articulate the standard mantra that had been adopted on all previous occasions, namely that the accusation that ‘no proper provision is made for the practise of their religion by Roman Catholic seamen in the Royal Navy is incorrect.’ As he had explained on 26 February, ‘Every possible facility, consistent with the exigencies of the Service, is accorded, and while it is impossible to place a Roman Catholic priest on board His Majesty’s ships, provision is made at all ports where Roman Catholic missions exist to afford spiritual ministrations to the men.’ This was a valid point. Research within the Admiralty secretariat for this answer had shown that in addition to employing Catholic Chaplains at £175 per annum at major naval ports such as Portsmouth and Devonport, the Admiralty spent a further £1778 each year on salaries for Catholic chaplains across its many establishments. The Board had also recently increased its supply of Catholic prayer books and taken on an additional Catholic priest on the China Station. All in all, the Admiralty was of the view that the Royal

22 Statement by Sergeant Walter Samuel Andrews RMLI, 26 July 1902, ADM 1/7599, TNA.

23 Albert Barry, *The Life of Count Moore compiled from materials supplied by his Family* (Dublin: M.H. Gill & Son, 1905), p. 268. While complaints by the Catholic authorities about the lack of suitable religious provision for Catholic sailors were frequent, newspaper articles by the Catholic press mostly took the form of reporting parliamentary questions or anti-enlistment calls. The Moore interview is a significant exception.

24 The Admiralty’s copy is in ADM 1/7507, TNA.

Navy was considerably more generous in its approach to non-established denominations than were the world's other major navies. In public, this position was maintained up to and including Arnold-Forster's written answer of 1 July to William Delany and James Daly.²⁵

III

In private, however, the official stance was beginning to soften. On 29 March 1901, Father Frederick McClymont, who in 1900 had been appointed to the position of special service chaplain to the Catholic sailors on the China station, sent a telegraph through Admiralty channels to Cardinal Herbert Vaughan, Archbishop of Westminster and head of the Roman Catholic Church in England, asking permission 'to celebrate mass anywhere on sea or land.'²⁶ Father McClymont's message to the prelate was a perfect opportunity, if they so wished, for the officials in the Admiralty to reject this demand as contrary to all precedent as well as current practice and restate the existing policy regarding the inadmissibility of Catholic priests conducting services aboard naval vessels. Instead, the naval authorities not only passed on the message, but they did so with a hint as to how they would like it to be answered. 'Should His Eminence grant this,' so ran the note, 'the Admiralty would be glad that the answer should be so framed as to make it clear that the Admiralty is giving no orders and that ecclesiastical authority only is referred to.'²⁷ The Cardinal's office took the hint. 'I gather that you will not be unwilling to send the reply through the Admiralty,' stated the letter from Archbishop's House, Westminster. That being so, it went on: 'I would suggest that it might be worded as follows "Cardinal Vaughan grants Father McClymont's request." I do not think that such a message could be interpreted in any way as an order from the Admiralty.'²⁸

The officials agreed and on 8 April a telegram was sent from the Admiralty to the Commander-in-Chief in China authorizing a Catholic priest there to perform mass at sea, albeit on the authority of Cardinal Vaughan rather than the Board. While it was certainly possible for it to be denied that this constituted official sanction for a change of procedure, it could easily have been taken as such and it seems clear that both the naval authorities in London and the Catholic hierarchy in Westminster were aware of this. Did it have any effect? Although the file on this topic ends at this point – and it seems likely this was deliberate – an entry in the Admiralty Index makes it clear that Father McClymont was appointed to the battleship HMS *Goliath* in September 1901.²⁹ The Admiralty secretariat papers are, unsurprisingly, entirely silent on what he did whilst there. However, other naval records are more forthcoming. According to the log of HMS *Goliath*, having joined the vessel late on Sunday 17 September, Father McClymont celebrated Mass on board ship on the following ten Sundays before

25 Ibid.

26 C-in-C China to Admiralty, 29 March 1901, ADM 1/7567, TNA.

27 Sir Evan MacGregor to Monsignor Thomas Dunn, 1 April 1901. Ibid.

28 Dunn to MacGregor, 3 April 1901. Ibid.

29 Index entry for Father McClymont, ADM 12/1362, TNA.

disembarking late on 17 November.³⁰ Clearly the Cardinal's message, as forwarded by the Admiralty, was taken as sufficient authorization for the provision of Catholic services and duly acted upon.

What transpired in China appears to have provided both a model and an impetus for instigating change elsewhere. As will be recalled, on 1 July 1901 Arnold-Forster had flatly rejected the call by William Delany and James Daly for Catholic priests to be embarked on naval vessels. However, on 30 July 1901, seemingly out of the blue, an altogether different parliamentary answer was delivered to Delany. The text ran:

The Commander-in-Chief in the Mediterranean will be authorised to accommodate the Roman Catholic chaplain, now attached to the Mediterranean Squadron, on board one of the ships on the occasion of the ensuing cruise of the combined squadrons in the Atlantic.³¹

As the Admiralty file on this topic contains no paperwork at all for the period between 1 July and 30 July 1901, it is not possible to say definitively what led to this decision. However, all the available evidence suggests that it was the cumulative effect of the concerted agitation by the Irish Parliamentary Party and the Catholic hierarchy that produced this *volte face*. Yet, whatever the cause, as was the case with the China fleet, what this concession would mean in practice remained to be seen. While it might have been little more than a panicked response to a successful political campaign, as events would show, there were some within the Admiralty establishment who did not view this as a one-off conciliatory measure to get them through a difficult period, but as a chance to introduce a new, more inclusive system for religious ministrations.

On 2 August 1901 instructions were sent to Admiral Sir John 'Jacky' Fisher, Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Fleet, to accommodate a Catholic chaplain in one of his warships during the planned joint manoeuvres of the Channel and Mediterranean Fleets.³² Fisher was perfectly happy to embark the Rev. Francis Loughman, the local priest who was already ministering to his Catholic sailors when they went ashore, and promptly gave orders to this effect. He was, nevertheless, by inclination wary of Roman Catholic influence in the Navy and this instruction made him suspicious for he immediately spotted that the Admiralty's directions to him had one important gap: they said nothing whatsoever about what Loughman was expected to do once embarked.³³ Evidently believing that he was being placed in a false position with regard to published regulations, Fisher promptly wrote back to London referring directly to the Admiralty confidential letter of 27 February 1894 that barred all but Church of England services being performed aboard ship and demanding written instructions if, as

30 The log records 'Mass held for R.C.s' on Sunday 15 September through to Sunday 17 November inclusive. ADM 53/13781, TNA.

31 'Tuesday 30th July 1901. Answer to Mr Delany', ADM 1/7507, TNA.

32 Admiralty to Fisher, 2 August 1901. *Ibid.*

33 On Fisher's views concerning Roman Catholicism in the Navy, see Fisher to Arnold White, 16 July 1901 in Arthur J. Marder (ed.), *Fear God and Dread Nought: The Correspondence of Admiral of the Fleet Lord Fisher of Kilverstone*, 3 vols (London: Jonathan Cape, 1952–59), I, p. 199.

he evidently believed was possible, he was being subtly invited to deviate from these issued directions.³⁴

Upon reaching London, Fisher's letter was read by the Senior Naval Lord, Lord Walter Kerr, who, as it so happened, was also the most prominent practising Roman Catholic in the Navy. Kerr's minute makes it evident that Fisher had unerringly honed in upon the reason behind the deliberate vagueness in his instructions. Unable for political reasons to amend the regulations and incapable for legal reasons to order any transgression of the Naval Discipline Act, but desirous nonetheless of implementing a change, the Admiralty had said nothing on the matter in the hope that the local commander-in-chief would utilise his own discretion to fill the void for himself. However, Fisher's refusal to shoulder this responsibility on his own initiative forced Kerr's hand, impelling him to outline his thinking more precisely on this delicate topic.

Kerr began by admitting that the circular letter of 27 February 1897 did not offer much, if any, wriggle room. It was, Kerr accepted, 'very definite in its terms and leaves no latitude as to its universal application.' Somewhat disingenuously, Kerr stated that he fully concurred in the necessity for such a directive. This was not, of course, a prelude for arguing for its complete and undiluted implementation; on the contrary, he next proceeded to suggest that it would be expedient to set it aside. 'It seems somewhat anomalous,' he argued,

... after it has been announced in parliament that a R[oman] C[atholic] chaplain would accompany the combined cruise of the Med[iteranean] and Channel Fleets, that he should not be allowed to officiate to the R[oman] C[atholic] men of the fleet in any capacity beyond attendance on the sick, and the concession ... would not have been understood in this limited sense to those to whom the information was imparted.

Logically, this was all true and provided the perfect grounds on which Kerr could proceed to make the case that he really wished to advance. 'Regulations are framed for general, not for a blind following when the occasion for a departure from them, of which the C-in-C must always be the judge and it seems to be desirable to give him this latitude in this as in many other cases.' In practice, this meant writing to Fisher and, while affirming the 'general principle' of the regulations, allowing him to make exceptional departures from it if 'the special circumstances' made this, in his judgement, seem desirable.³⁵ Notwithstanding some residual deliberate ambiguity, the message to Fisher was easy enough to decipher: although the Board would not change the formal instructions, he should feel free to bend the rules if he so wished.

Even this level of ambiguity would soon be eroded. News that a Roman Catholic chaplain would embark with the Mediterranean Fleet soon got out. As a result, on 16 August 1901, G. A. Sim, a Presbyterian minister in Malta, asked if he, too, could accompany the fleet on its forthcoming cruise. While Fisher believed that consistency required a positive reply, the Admiralty did not. The request would be refused on the grounds that there was no necessity for a Protestant sailor on the brink of death to receive the last rites from a clergyman of his denomination; therefore the situation that gave grounds for embarking

34 Fisher to the Admiralty, 14 August 1901, ADM 1/7507, TNA.

35 Minute by Kerr, 21 August 1901. Ibid.

a Catholic priest did not apply to Presbyterians. However, for Lord Selborne, First Lord of the Admiralty, the very existence of the request raised troubling issues, especially when it came to the vexed question of services aboard ship. 'I admit,' he penned, that

it is not logical to embark a R[oman] C[atholic] priest and not allow him to hold services; but see the result if permission is accorded! See the accompanying application from the Presbyterian minister! If the R[oman] C[atholic] priest is allowed to hold services as well as to attend the sick and dying, can you furnish me with any argument for refusing to allow the Presbyterian and Wesleyan ministers to embark, too?³⁶

Kerr's reply covered three pages and advanced a variety of different points, but the key one was that Kerr was proposing not to change the publicly proclaimed policy, only the locally administered practice.

The problem is a very difficult one to deal with and I think that the best course is to fall back on 'masterly inactivity', in other words to do nothing, i.e. to maintain Article 1 of the Art[icles] of War and to stand by the Admiralty letter of [27 February] 1894, but on the other hand not to censure the admirals if in the exercise of their judgment they may under special circumstances have allowed a departure.³⁷

Selborne promptly fell in with this subterfuge. As he informed Kerr, this 'expresses my view exactly. No action is required.'³⁸

As we can see, therefore, having taken a first step in April 1901 on the distant China station, between July and September 1901, in the face of considerable political pressure, the Admiralty adopted a new procedure with regard to the exercise of the Catholic religion at sea. While on the face of it maintaining the strict public monopoly on Anglican services as laid down in numerous acts and regulations, the naval authorities made it apparent, if only by subtle means, that admirals were free to bend the rules on their stations, although no official encouragement or sanction for this would be provided. However, for this to work, it was important that the shift was not explicitly spelt out. It is notable in this respect that a memorandum produced by the Naval Law Branch in May 1902 on 'Arrangements made by Admiralty for Spiritual Ministration to Roman Catholics in the Fleet' shows no awareness of it at all.³⁹

How did this work out in practice? Given what was being proposed, it is hardly to be wondered that, beyond acknowledging receipt of his instructions, Fisher sent back no details of the action he took. Clearly, the admiral understood that, having encouraged local action in order to absolve themselves of any responsibility, the Board did not wish to be told officially how this local discretion had been used. A similar situation arose when the experiment was repeated in 1903.

36 Minute by Selborne, 26 August 1901. Ibid.

37 Minute by Kerr, 12 September 1901. Ibid.

38 Minute by Selborne, 13 September 1901. Ibid.

39 Memorandum of 29 May 1902, ADM 1/7597, TNA.

IV

In the first weeks August 1903 a series of manoeuvres and tactical exercises were held by the Home Fleet. In anticipation of this, in mid-July the Reverend Hamilton Macdonald, acting for the Archbishop of Westminster, asked for a Catholic chaplain to be embarked with one of the squadrons. The Admiralty agreed and Father Macdonald himself was appointed for the duration of the manoeuvres to the battleship *Sans Pareil* in Vice-Admiral Sir Arthur Wilson's 'B' Fleet (as it was designated for the exercises), a development that was announced with evident approval in late July in the Catholic periodical *The Tablet* and subsequently reported by other papers.⁴⁰ Unfortunately, the file explaining the circumstances surrounding the Admiralty's decision to appoint Father Macdonald is no longer extant, but it is entirely reasonable to suggest that it reflected no more than an obvious extension of the decisions already taken in 1901.⁴¹ Equally unfortunately, there is also no official report surviving in the naval archives on the role that this new Catholic chaplain performed while serving with the fleet. However, this gap can partly be filled by the Reverend Macdonald himself, since, upon his return, he penned a lengthy submission for his own superiors in the English Catholic hierarchy, subsequently published in *The Tablet*. This enumerates in some detail the various activities he performed while at sea. With regard to the provision of Mass aboard ship his report made two central claims: first, that 'it was possible with few exceptions, to have a daily mass on board the *Sans Pareil*, at which several of the ship's company assisted' and second, that on 'Sundays in harbour two Masses and sermons were held in different ships.' The report went on to record that attendance at the two Masses on the last Sunday in harbour was considerable with some 270 officers and men present at the first Mass on board HMS *Magnificent* and a further 370 assembling for the second Mass on the *Sans Pareil*. Unsurprisingly, the Reverend Macdonald regarded this as definitive proof that a genuine need existed for a permanent Catholic chaplain with the home fleet, an appointment he described as 'quite practical.'⁴²

Can Father Macdonald's report be relied upon? For reasons that will become clear below, in the summer of 1906, Sir Evan MacGregor, the Admiralty Secretary, was asked to ascertain whether Mass had ever been celebrated on board any British warships in recent times. Accordingly, MacGregor checked through the secretariat papers. He drew a blank. As he reported: 'As regards precedents asked for, search has been made through papers extending over the last 20 years or so, on the subject of the arrangements sanctioned by the Admiralty for spiritual ministrations to Roman Catholics serving in the Fleet, without any specific reference being found to the celebration of the Mass on board one of H.M. ships.'⁴³ What was true in 1906 is still true today: the Secretary's

40 *The Tablet*, 25 July 1901, 130. Among the papers to pick up the story were: *The Irish Times*, 25 July 1903; *The Irish News and Belfast Morning News*, 27 July 1903; and *The Hampshire Telegraph*, 1 August 1903.

41 In the absence of the original papers, details come from the entry for docket Admiralty 20 July 1903 under cuts 50 Mob and 71-22 in the Admiralty digest. ADM 12/1391 and ADM 12/1393, TNA.

42 'Catholic Naval Chaplains', *The Tablet*, 12 September 1903, p. 422.

43 Memorandum by Evan MacGregor, 23 July 1906, ADM 1/7814, TNA.

Department papers contain no documentation that would verify Hamilton Macdonald's claims. However, as was the case with Father McClymont on the *China Station* in 1901, there are other naval records – ones that Sir Evan MacGregor would not have consulted – that do corroborate the priest's report, namely the logs of the vessels that took part in the August 1903 manoeuvres.⁴⁴ The log of HMS *Magnificent*, for example, records that at 8.45 am on Sunday 16 August Roman Catholic sailors from that vessel were sent to HMS *Drake* to take part in a Catholic service, an event that the log of HMS *Drake* confirms took place at 9.30 am. The log of HMS *Magnificent* also records that at 9 am on Sunday 23 August a Roman Catholic service was held aboard ship. In a similar vein, the logs of HMS *Empress of India* and HMS *Royal Oak* confirm that at 9.30 am on the same Sunday morning Roman Catholic sailors were sent to the *Sans Pareil*, the log of which vessel confirms that a Roman Catholic service was held there at 10.30. The log of the *Sans Pareil* also records that the numbers that came aboard for this service were 25 sailors from *Revenge*, 39 from *Royal Sovereign*, 45 from *Edgar*, 16 from *Venus*, 90 from *Empress of India*, 35 from *Royal Oak*, 19 from *Dido*, 33 from *Hood* and 30 from *Hawke*. This makes a total of 332, which, in conjunction with an unspecified number of sailors from the *Sans Pareil* itself, tallies closely with Hamilton Macdonald's estimate of 370.⁴⁵

Father Macdonald was, of course, only responsible for the spiritual welfare of Catholics in Sir Arthur Wilson's 'B' Fleet, which poses the question of what provision, if any, existed in Sir Compton Domville's opposing 'X' Fleet. The article in *The Tablet* that announced Father Macdonald's appointment was confident that they would not be neglected. 'The Catholics on board the "X" Fleet are already well provided for,' it stated, 'as one of the battleships will have on board the permanent chaplain of the Mediterranean station, the Rev. Peter Grobel.'⁴⁶ The basis for this statement is not clear and it is notable that the Admiralty Index, which was so definitive about Father McClymont's embarkation on HMS *Goliath* in 1901, does not provide comparable support for the idea that Father Grobel was offered similar on-board facilities in 1903. However, someone must have been, for the logs of the ships in 'X' Fleet are clear that mass was celebrated there, too. Thus, on Sunday 16 August, a Catholic service was held on HMS *Implacable* at 9.15 am for the Catholics both of that vessel and also for those of *Bulwark* and *Exmouth*; while at 10.30 a similar service was held on HMS *Illustrious*, at which were also present the Catholics from *Formidable*, *Irresistible* and *London*. A week later, a Catholic service was held at 8.45 am on HMS *Exmouth*, also attended by Catholics from *Bulwark*, *Formidable*, *Implacable* and *Renown*; while at

44 Ships' logs were largely navigational and meteorological documents. Although, like the Secretariat papers, they were retained in the Admiralty Record Office, they were not part of the archive of the Secretary's Department and were not routinely entered into the Admiralty Index or Digest. The fact that Sir Evan did not consult them is unsurprising.

45 The logs in question are: *Drake* (ADM 53/19792), *Empress of India* (ADM 53/20105) *Magnificent* (ADM 53/23395), *Royal Oak* (ADM 53/25804) and *Sans Pareil* (ADM 53/25916).

46 *The Tablet*, 25 July 1901, p. 130.

10.30 there was another on HMS *London* at which were likewise present Catholics from the battleships *Caesar*, *Illustrious* and *Irresistible*.⁴⁷

If, as therefore seems certain, Roman Catholic Masses were held on board British naval vessels during the August 1903 naval manoeuvres, then this represented a significant breach of the publicly proclaimed Anglican hegemony, but at the same time it was also the logical corollary of the experiment started in 1901 to allow commanders-in-chief to exercise their own judgment on the provision of spiritual ministrations to Catholic sailors in ships under their command. In short, it suggests that so long as the naval authorities in Whitehall did not know officially what was happening – and, as we have seen, in July 1906, the Admiralty had no information on whether Catholic services had been celebrated aboard ship in the previous 20 years – they were ready and willing to turn a blind eye.

V

This poses the obvious question: why did the new stance not continue? Part of the answer is almost certainly context. Shifts in the law and changes in public attitudes notwithstanding, at the start of the twentieth century sectarian conflict had not disappeared from Britain and the growing strength and increased presence of Roman Catholicism could still arouse bitter passions. One sign of this was the ritualist controversy. The desire of certain high church Anglicans to adopt traditional Catholic ceremonial practices, sparked a strong evangelical Protestant backlash that took the form of the anti-ritualist movement. Although the hostility of the anti-ritualists to all things ‘Romish’ was aimed principally at ‘romanisers’ within the Anglican Church, it inevitably highlighted and heightened residual anti-Catholic feeling in Britain. One consequence of this was a renewed sensitivity among even moderate Protestants to any addition to the role of the Catholic Church in the mainstream of British national life, not to mention the violent opposition of ultra-Protestants, such as John Kensit and the highly vocal Protestant Truth Society. In 1908, the potential for such sentiments to be mobilised would be vividly demonstrated to the government when a planned Catholic Eucharistic procession in London caused a major controversy that ruined the career of at least one cabinet minister. There were other earlier and less dramatic signs, for example the periodic debates over education or the desirability of the anti-Catholic wording of the monarch’s accession oath, that made it obvious that it was necessary to tread carefully on such matters.⁴⁸ The fact that complaints from self-proclaimed defenders of Protestantism could arise out of an innocuous visit in May 1908 by some sailors from HMS *Queen* and *Hussar* to Rome, during which they were received by

47 The logs in question are: *Bulwark* (ADM 53/18302), *Caesar* (ADM 53/18326), *Exmouth* (ADM 53/20340), *Formidable* (ADM 53/21007), *Illustrious* (ADM 53/22155), *Implacable* (ADM 53/22188), *Irresistible* (ADM 53/22264), *London* (ADM 53/23312) and *Renown* (ADM 53/25441). The log of *Russell* (ADM 53/25836) records that the ship ‘sent R[oman] C[atholic]s to Mass’, but states neither the time nor the vessel to which they were sent.

48 G. I. T. Machin, *Politics and the Churches in Great Britain 1869–1921* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987), pp. 293–5; idem, ‘The Liberal Government and the Eucharistic Procession of 1908’, *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, XXXIV (1983), pp. 559–83.

the Pope, reinforced the point and illustrated that even the most innocent activities by members of the Navy could attract unwanted external sectarian sentiments.⁴⁹

It was in this context that the Catholic hierarchy made the mistake of trying to formalise the new arrangements. In September 1903 a request was made by the Archbishop of Westminster's office for a Roman Catholic chaplain to be appointed to the Channel Fleet. The Board was singularly unimpressed. Once again, the original papers on this matter no longer exist, but a copy of the minute penned in response by the Senior Naval Lord, Lord Walter Kerr, and agreed to by his colleagues Sir Charles Dury, the Second Naval Lord, and Admiral John Durnford, the Junior Naval Lord, was made for another file.⁵⁰ It reads:

No suggestion is made as to how the difficulties which have hitherto stood in the way of the appointment here proposed are to be got over.

I should be very glad if it were possible to place a Roman Catholic Chaplain in every large squadron, but it would be necessary to climb a good many fences before we find a clear road to this.

Of these difficulties Canon Fenton is probably quite unaware, or he might have given some reason for asking for a concession which, from force of circumstances, has hitherto not been entertained.⁵¹

Clearly, as this minute suggests, it was one thing to tolerate a deviation from the rules made locally in response to so-called 'special circumstances,' it was quite another for the Board to sanction a change of policy in the full and open glare of publicity. This important distinction would become obvious again when the issue was revisited three years later.

In July 1906 a meeting took place between the Archbishop of Westminster, a position now held by Francis Bourne, and the new First Lord of the Admiralty, Lord Tweedmouth.⁵² The first topic that the archbishop raised was the question of celebrating mass on board ship. Evidently, he hoped to persuade Lord Tweedmouth to sanction this officially, using the informal, local arrangements of previous years as part of his argument. The new First Lord sought information and advice from within his department. Graham Greene, one of the principal clerks, confirmed the compromise reached in 1901:

As to the celebration of mass on board ship, I believe that where a R[oman] C[atholic] priest has been sent afloat with a squadron it would be expected that he would officiate in this respect, but the conditions under which it would be celebrated would of course have to be determined by the C.-in-C. and Captain.⁵³

49 See docket Foreign Office, 23 June 1908, ADM 1/8021, TNA.

50 The missing record is Pro M157/1903. Information about it can be found in the digest volumes covering Cuts 50–2 and 71–22, ADM 12/1391 and ADM 12/1393, TNA.

51 Minute by Kerr, no date [September 1903], ADM 1/7814, TNA.

52 Mark Vickers, *By the Thames Divided. Cardinal Bourne in Southwark and Westminster* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2013).

53 Minute by Greene, 18 July 1906, ADM 1/7814, TNA.

However, as before, there was a world of difference between turning a blind eye to local interpretations of the rules and actually changing those rules. On this point, the advice of the permanent secretary, Sir Evan MacGregor, was clear: irrespective of what might be tolerated on far away stations, 'the consistent policy of the Admiralty has been to give no order which can be taken to conflict with Section 1 of the Naval Discipline Act.' And he added a crucial warning that there were many 'difficulties and objections to giving any Admiralty orders, but if it is still desired to pursue the question it is suggested that the Sea Lords be referred to as the matter is one which concerns discipline and internal organisation of ships.' MacGregor then proceeded to rehearse the usual arguments, namely that if Catholic clergy were allowed to perform services aboard warships then it would be impossible to exclude the clerics of other denominations, that warships were not adapted for multiple different services and that, in any case, the flow of life aboard ship did not provide the time for this to take place. It was also contrary to existing legislation.⁵⁴ If Lord Tweedmouth had possessed any inclination to grant the request, and there is no evidence that he did, MacGregor's advice promptly and utterly dispelled this. Writing to Archbishop Bourne, the First Lord made it clear that his 'proposal that the Admiralty allow Mass according to the Roman Catholic rite to be said on board His Majesty's ships' was simply 'not practicable.' Accordingly, while he conceded that mass had on occasion been celebrated at sea in recent years 'by private arrangement with the captain' – further proof that this had occurred on the China station and the Mediterranean – this had 'not been recognised officially by the Admiralty' and nor would it be in the future. He concluded, 'I cannot hold out any prospects that we shall be able to give a general permission for the holding of these services on board His Majesty's ships.'⁵⁵

There was nothing in Tweedmouth's reply that ruled out continuing with the experiment of allowing local commanders-in-chief to interpret the rules as they wished. Nevertheless, it does not appear as if this was continued. Sir Evan MacGregor's memorandum of 23 July 1906 indicated that no Catholic priests had been embarked since August 1903 and he evidently did not desire to restart this practice. Moreover, with the original architects of the experiment, Lord Walter Kerr and Lord Selborne, both having departed the Admiralty – in 1904 and 1905 respectively – there no longer appeared to be any impetus behind it. On top of that, the fact that the Catholic Hierarchy seemed to have interpreted an informal blind eye approach as a green light for asking for a more formal policy shift, clearly further dampened any ardour for continuing the scheme, let alone instigating additional change. Revealingly, in September 1908, in response to inquiries from the Commander-in-Chief of the Atlantic Fleet, the Admiralty formally confirmed that 'Circular Letter No. L.10979 of the 27th February 1894 respecting the prohibition on board H.M. ships &c of religious service and meetings of ministers of religion other than those of the established Church of England' was still in force.⁵⁶ The message was unambiguous. Even more categorical was the answer given to the Archbishop of Westminster in person in November 1909 when he restated his call for

54 Minute and Memorandum by MacGregor, 23 July 1906. *Ibid.*

55 Tweedmouth to Bourne, 3 August 1906. *Ibid.*

56 Admiralty to Vice-Admiral Sir Assheton Curzon-Howe, 24 September 1908, ADM 1/7987, TNA.

a Catholic priest to be attached to the Home Fleet. 'I told him at once that this was out of the question,' reported the Admiralty Secretary.⁵⁷ Such bluntness left little room for discussion. Thus, in effect the years 1901 to 1903 marked the brief time frame for this experiment and 1906 was the point at which it was abandoned.

VI

The Victorian, Edwardian and Georgian Navy is often depicted as a reactionary organisation that was conservative in outlook and resistant to change. Recent research has tended to debunk such tropes, pointing out that, as with all fighting forces, the Royal Navy was both an institution of the society it served and also one that needed to reflect the values of the nation it existed to defend.⁵⁸ The United Kingdom had an established church in England and, therefore, so, too, did the Royal Navy. As in civil society, so in the Royal Navy, the Anglican Church enjoyed a privileged position. However, it was also the case that in nineteenth century Britain many of the legal barriers to the free exercise of religious conscience were being progressively removed. Balancing these two potentially opposing forces was not easy for the Admiralty, but as this article has shown, the naval hierarchy was not above seeking creative ways to square the circle. By the turn of the twentieth century means had been found to ensure that Catholic sailors could partake in Mass when ashore, but no solution had been found to the problem of extending such rights to naval vessels at sea. Political, legal and organisational barriers all stood in the way. In March 1901, however, the decision was taken to ignore these. In a move somewhat similar to the 'don't ask, don't tell' methodology adopted more recently by the US Navy in regard to homosexuality, the Admiralty devolved the management of Catholic services at sea to local commanders-in-chief on the understanding that they could deviate from published regulations so long as no one in London was told about this on the record or required to sanction it officially. Thus, contrary to the claim often made in the current historiography that 'in October 1914, the redoubtable Dom Odo Weld-Blundell, O[rder of] S[t] B[enedict], enjoyed the distinction of being the first Catholic priest to celebrate Mass on board a Royal Navy vessel since the reign of James II', Fathers McClymont, MacDonald and Grobel had already broken that barrier some eleven years earlier.⁵⁹ Unfortunately, the compromise that made this possible worked only until attempts were made to take it to its logical conclusion and formalise it. At that point the experiment was ended and it would take a world war (or two) to restore this more latitudinarian approach.

Why has this policy not been discovered before? Obviously, the fact that the naval leadership did not advertise their new departure in religious ministrations meant that it was not a development that was out in the open. Hidden from plain sight it seems largely to have escaped the notice of contemporaries. More peculiarly, perhaps, it has also

57 Minute by Sir Charles Inigo Thomas, 8 November 1909, ADM 1/8041, TNA.

58 Matthew S. Seligmann 'A Service Ready for Total War? The State of the Royal Navy in July 1914', *English Historical Review* CXXXIII (2018), pp. 98–122.

59 Hugh O'Neill, 'Irish Catholic Chaplains in the British Armed Forces during the First World War', *Seanchas Ardmhacha: Journal of the Armagh Diocesan Historical Society* XXIII (2011), p. 211.

been missed by historians. To a large extent this omission seems to reflect the specific emphasis readily discernible in the current historiography of religion in the British armed forces. While there is, to be sure, reference in the literature to Catholic chaplains for the armed forces, in most cases, the existing studies focus predominantly on the army, with the Royal Navy, if discussed at all, being largely a token presence.⁶⁰ Moreover, even where the Navy is subject to proper scrutiny, it is notable that this generally occurs in the narrow chronological confines of the First World War, in which context, the decade and a half preceding the conflict are often covered only briefly and purely as a backdrop to the situation that existed when the fighting began. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, even those studies that make the Royal Navy their main focus, often do so on the basis of sources other than the Admiralty records. While there is no doubt much to be learnt from say Catholic periodicals about Catholic opinion and grievances, the views, actions and inactions of the naval authorities cannot properly be understood without reference to their own papers. As this article has demonstrated, delving into these archives opens up entirely new vistas about the treatment of Catholicism in the Royal Navy.

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60 For example, Oliver Rafferty, 'Catholic Chaplains to the British Forces in the First World War', *Religion, State & Society* XXXIX (2011), devotes one of 29 pages to the Navy. Haggerty, *Priests in Uniform* devotes one of 16 chapters.