17th Century Protestant Thoughts and the Sermons of the English East India Company

Noémi Harding
Pázmány Péter Catholic University

Abstract. The aim of this article is to show the religious thoughts of the Reformation and its effects in England and how prayer guides and prayers were written for the English East India Company during the 17th century. The religious changes of the Early Modern Era can be found even in the relation of trading companies to religion. Religiousness was very important in that time, not only in the motherland but also on the seas and in foreign lands. Next to theological theories, 17th century sermons, prayers and prayer guides were also consulted in the writing process of this article. Religion and trade did not exclude each other, the contemporaries thought that these mutually helped each other and the merchants were the link that connected the two even more.

Key Words. English East India Company, Religion, Prayers, Sermons, 17th century.

“In vitâ, sumus in viâ” (Terry 1649)

In the 17th century, religion was an essential part of life for the individual, the community, the Church and for the secular powers as well. This was not different in the case of the religiousness of the English East India Company. Due to the Reformation developing through the 16th century, multiple denominations and churches were founded, which thought about and connected to God in different ways, sometimes similarly, sometimes with huge diversity.

The religious turmoils in the era of the great discoveries were all connected in some aspects. The English East India Company is, thus, one of the connection points.
Protestant Thoughts and Praying

In the English mind, Sir Francis Drake was like a second Adam in the new Eden. Drake enthusiastically served the religious laws, which the believers thought benefited the individual and national interests. Besides this, he became an appropriate patron for the newly emerging “Anglican Empire’s” mutilated creed: Christ called all the men for a life-long service (Hodgkins 1997: 464). Some served Christ, some served others.

The separation of the English Church from the Holy See became official during the 16th century, but it already had different rites from the Roman Catholic Church before that. Under Elizabeth I, the Church gained strength, but it was under attacks through the 17th century. The Puritanism of the Cromwellian era, Protestant Pluralism, the Stuart Restoration and the Catholic ties of some monarchs all exerted their pressure on the Church of England.

There were a lot of arguments among the early 17th century English Protestants about overt prayers at public ceremonies, but the question was not whether private prayer guides were needed or not, and not only for the clergy and the learned (Garrett 1993: 330). One problem for the prayer guide writers and worshipers of the 17th century was the different images of God. Working with an angry and loving God, God as king or judge or, oppositely, God as Father, they needed to choose between these or work with these dualities (Garrett 1993: 334). God is dual in a different way as well: on the one hand he is susceptible towards human feelings, on the other hand he is constant, thus he is immune to them because human passion is the consequence of the Downfall, but humanity has the chance to change spiritually (Garrett 1993: 342).

According to Protestant theology, only Christ can overcome the abyss between profane and saint. Protestant prayer guides reveal the human desire to directly communicate with God and, because of this, they need a language, a format which is suitable for the connection with God. The texts want to show how to pray, what are the appropriate attitudes, tones, gestures and words for this (Garrett 1993: 354-355). The prayer guides and books helped the believers to understand the religious practices and prayers on a more individual level. For example, cited in Garrett, John Preston’s The Saints Daily Exercise: A Treatise Concerning the Whole Dutie of Prayer, printed in 1629, the author writes that “for it is the most spirituall action, wherein we have nearer communication with God, then in any other holy performance”. In Reformed theology, people’s direct communication with God gains importance, because private prayer gives the spine of religion. With the personal connection to God individual Christianity got stronger. Before this, little emphasis was put on private prayer outside the
monasteries, but with the Reformation this was democratized and people could talk to God “alone” (Garrett 1993: 330-331). According to the prayer guides, God answers the prayers, but due to failed humanity, the worshiper does not receive the Adam-sort of direct, verbal and instant answers like in Eden but has to learn God’s signals and how to interpret them (Garrett 1993: 353).

Martin Luther rejects the Catholic thought that the prayers recited in Latin are useful due to the fact that the worshipers did not understand or could not really feel it. John Calvin similarly thought that God loathed dishonest prayers and this can also be seen in the English prayer guides which emphasize that the prayers need to come from the heart (Garrett 1993: 344). The English Protestant prayer guides emphasise honesty but do not neglect rhetoric and rationality: even if the prayer comes from the heart it cannot lack reason (Garrett 1993: 345).

17th century prayer guides wanted to avoid “empty” words getting into the prayers, but they were aware that humans can only communicate with God in person and directly through words and other symbols, so, according to this, language and words have the power to overcome the abyss between profane and saint (Garrett 1993: 356). Only a few books support spontaneous prayers because they thought that these were not enough to serve God (Garrett 1993: 349). Judged by the multitude of warnings it seems that private prayers needed to be deliberate and conscious even if they were “only” reciting the already written prayers (Garrett 1993: 348). According to several Protestant prayer definitions prayer is internal, nonverbal and its place is in the heart (Garrett 1993: 345-346).

According to James 5.16: “Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much” [King James Version (KJV)]. This quote brings up the question of how a prayer becomes effective. According to the prayer guides, God listens to the prayers or rejects them, but how do people know that it even reached him? Generally, they thought that the prayer was rejected due to the worshipers’ fault, because the prayer was insufficient or the worshiper did not recognize God’s answer, this is why it was important to learn how to interpret God’s signs (Garrett 1993: 352-353).

Some thought the expression of feelings were a sign of zeal, but they were also worried that they were empty, they thought that the gestures and words needed to be honest, and Protestantism generally thought symbolic demonstrations suspicious due to the hypocrisy of Roman Catholic religious ceremonies and rejected private and public religious practices, which they considered an external formality rather than inner religiousness (Garrett 1993: 346-347).
They considered that although set, edited, already written prayers were important, they fall behind original prayers, because they show human weakness, meaning that if people would be stronger mentally and spiritually, they could communicate with God without the given forms and words and as God theoretically can read the hearts of people, no outward formality is needed. However, according to the Bible, some sort is in fact desired (Garrett 1993: 352-353).

Maintaining the English Protestant Community in the Flow of World Economy

As for the English East India Company, although it was an economic organization, religion was important. They tried to secure the faith of the Company’s employees in several ways. Besides maintaining their own religion, the early English East India Company at first mostly respected the religion and customs of the locals and other Europeans. This can be seen in a letter from 1635, which was written for some members of a voyage:

*Instructions to Messrs. Bornford and Wylde for the Same Voyage, April 9, 1635*

[…] A diary should be kept during the voyage; and, should they touch at Malacca, information should be gathered regarding the trade and customs of that place. […] And that no scandall may be given or taken in point of religion (wherein that nation is very tender) lett your exercises of devotion be constant but private, without singing of psalmes, which is nowhere permitted unto our nation in the King of Spaines domynions, except in embassadors houses. Lett our religion appeare in our good conversation amongst men, which will best expresse us to be Reform’d Christians. Howsoever, let not your opinions disturbe their practise, nor your curiosity to prye into their ceremonies distast them in your irregularity or unconformity. In briefe, doe not yourselves, nor permitt not any others to give, any offence in matters of religion.

(Foster 1911: 105-106)

The letter also added that “care must also be taken to prevent the Portuguese merchants from cheating the Company by false entries of bulky goods or concealment of smaller articles, possibly with the connivance of some of the English. They should find out the practice of the Portuguese in such matters and follow it” (Foster 1911: 106).

It caused trouble for the English East India Company to maintain the English Protestant community. According to Eyre Chatterton, Gerald Aungier, who was the Company’s second president (1669-1677) in Bombay, thought, as the next paragraph will show, that the decrease of the English Protestant community comes from the lack of English women there. It was not rare that the English married Portuguese women, who strictly kept
the Roman Catholic religion and who expected that their children be brought up according to their own religion. Aungier even sent a letter to the London headquarters because of this.

Whereas, for want of Englishwomen, many of the English and other Protestant soldiers sent out do marry with Portuguese mesties (half-caste women), natives of the island, who are Roman Catholics, by which means the children of the said Protestants are through their fathers’ neglect brought up in the Roman Catholic principles, to the great dishonour and weakening the Protestant religion and interest: wherefore for the preventing the evil consequences which may in time accrue therefrom, that the Company would please not only to encourage the sending out of Englishwomen, but also to establish a standing order that the children of all Protestant fathers be brought up carefully in the Protestant religion, though the mothers thereof be Roman Catholics, and that severe penalties be inflicted on all offenders, especially on the Padres who shall endeavour to baptise the said children or any attempt to inveigle or entice them away from the Protestant faith. (Chatterton 1924).

It is interesting that a few years later in Madras at a meeting of the Company on the 22nd March 1680, where all the members of the council appeared, under Streynsham Master the topic of mixed marriages also emerged:

Phinehas Brewster an English freeman being Marryed to a Portuguez Woman the Widow of Francis Barrick an English Man by Antonio Farnandis a Portuguez Clerigo on the 21th: September last against the orders made and published the 4 th: Aprill 1678: which Priest did not belong to this place and is since fled out of this jurisdiction to avoyd exemplar punishment which shall be inflicted upon him whenever he comes within the verge of this government to be laid hold on. (Records of Fort St. George 1912: 18-19)

Though the records also mention that the marriages between Protestants and Roman Catholics is not against the law and has been practiced beforehand and that is also a way to prevent fornication and in truth that there are not enough English women there and that “it is alsoe further to be remembred that these Roman Catholicks of the Portugez Nation were invited hither upon our first settlement, ground given them to build upon, a Church and french Priests allowed to encourage them to come and Inhabit here, they have been Loyall and Serviceable in the defence of the place in time of warr and are a great security to us upon that accott: and our greatest income arises from the Customes upon their Commerce” (Records of Fort St. George 1912: 18-19).
There were people whom the Portuguese Jesuits frustrated even more: “I could heere say much of the double diligence of Iesuites their poysoning with the Coloquintida of Popery many thousand soules in the East Indies and Iapan, and other the remotest parts of the world: All which might bee Motiues strong enough to stirre you vp to haue a greater care of the planting of the Gospell in your Plantations” (Copland 1622: 30).

Roman Catholic priests held religious ceremonies for the Portuguese and non-Portuguese worshipers, even in Madras’ White Town and Black Town. The number of Roman Catholics in White Town increased so much that three years after its foundation a French priest requested a chapel to be built from the governor of Fort St. George and thus in the town of the English East India Company founded under the antipapist Elizabeth I. a Roman Catholic church was built with a priest who led it, but there was no church or a chaplain for the English Protestantism there (Barlow 1921: 47-48).

The Madras of the English East India Company did not have a church or chaplain there in the early days because they did not think it was necessary for such a small community. The governor or his deputy read the sermons on Sunday mornings and evenings (Barlow 1921: 47). In 1645 the Agent of the Company requested an Anglican chaplain for the settlement and after the chaplain arrived he held masses every day in the mornings and evenings in a specific room in the Fort and the presence of the young employees was obligatory otherwise they were punished (Barlow 1921: 48). The Church of St. Mary, which was finally built in 1680, is the oldest English church in Madras and the subcontinent.

The Company did not only have to secure the English religious community, but also had to pay attention so that the English children did not “get lost” in the other cultures of the subcontinent and needed to concentrate on English education as well. The Company did not interfere with education in Madras, which led to stronger Roman Catholic influence, but after several letters sent by Patrick Warner, a temporary chaplain, they sent a Protestant schoolmaster there, after Warner returned to England.

They wrote that, as there were now in Fort St. George “so many married families,” they were sending out “one Mr. Ralph Orde to be schoolmaster at the Fort [...] who is to teach all the Children to read English and to write and Cypher gratis, and if any of the other Natives, as Portuguez, Gentues (Telugus), or others will send their Children to School, we require they be also taught gratis [...] and he is likewise to instruct them in the Principles of the Protestant religion”. (Barlow 1921: 89)

Orde arrived in 1677 and this meant the start of Government education in Madras (Barlow 1921: 89).
In addition, next to the importance of the education of English and British children, the question of the schooling of local children was brought up. In 1688 the idea of building a school for the local children in Black Town emerged, to teach them to read, write, speak in English, count, and to learn trading affairs, but the council at Madras said a few years later that although they received the rights for taxation, they did not have the money for it (Barlow 1921: 90). They said that the population of Black Town was not used to this kind of tax and feared that it would lead to mass emigration from their settlement, this is the reason why the local English school did not come to be. The school in White Town, on the other hand, worked with English, Hindu, Eurasian, Indian, Muslim, and Christian children. In the end, they entrusted the leading of the school to the chaplain of St. Mary’s church, but finally they thought it would be better if it was not under church control and preferred to create a charity type of school known in England, which would be free for the poor British children and which was eventually founded in 1715 (Barlow 1921: 91). With this, the Company’s English schooling system for the non-Europeans ceased, but in the same year the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge founded several schools in Madras for Indian and local children (Barlow 1921: 91). Thus the year of 1715 is the starting date of English Protestant evangelical education, even if in the beginning they asked for the help of the Danish Lutheran mission (Barlow 1921: 92).

The religious life of adults was also an issue. The Company fined those employees for swearing, for blasphemy, for not going to Sunday and Wednesday prayers, for leaving the Fort without a permit and for drunkenness, and the money raised from these fines was kept in a box which was reserved for the (usually English) poor, initially only in Surat and Fort St. George, but later it was prescribed in the smaller factories in the Bay of Bengal (Penny 1904: 201). The Chief Justice of Bombay, George Wilcox arrived in 1672, and first ordered a fast and later issued a proclamation against profanity, drunkenness and impurity (BL, IOR 2 July 1696, G/36/95. fo.47).

**Sermons about Trade, Danger, and Christianity**

The maintenance of the English religious community was not only important on the mainland. Due to the basic purpose of the Company, the time spent on the ships is not negligible. Thus the time spent on the sea cannot be overlooked when discussing religious practice. They thought to secure the maintenance of faith with ship chaplains and sermons, which was not only a characteristic of the English East India Company, but, for example, the Levant and the
Virginia Companies and others as well. Some of the sermons were written for special occasions, like launching a ship, a farewell before the voyage or for the voyage itself, but on occasions there were thanksgiving texts for a successful voyage and survival.

Several sermons (for example at the Levant Company) refer to the compatibility of wealth and Christianity, since these help each other (Glaisyer 2006: 86). An important task for the merchants was the spreading of Christianity (Glaisyer 2006: 98). Commerce could be used to serve God, fortune and grace; trading and being wealthy meant a special responsibility to be God’s “companion” and help spread Christianity with the example of financing sermons and prayer books (Glaisyer 2006: 99).

One story which occurs several times in the texts written for the companies is the parable of the merchant and the pearl. “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchant man, seeking goodly pearls: Who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had, and bought it” (KJV Matt. 13:45-46). The significance of this tale is that the ultimate goal of life is to reach the “pearl” which can be interpreted as spiritually uncorrupted or heavenly afterlife and that everything should be done to live accordingly. In this sense, the parable was used to “profanely” explain that all that the merchants do to achieve their goals, they should do the same, or more, to secure their Christianity.

A Dutch preacher, John Wing, who also wrote a sermon for the English East India Company, uses trade as a metaphor for the sake of better understanding. In the text he writes about heavenly commerce and explains why that it is better and more useful than worldly trade. In his sermon starting “The Best Merchandise”, published in 1622, he analyzed in detail the story of the trader and the pearl.

He that hath found this pearle, went incontinently to sell all he had (out of hand) to buy the feilde wherein it was hyd, he knew it to be of such worth, that he part’s with all he is worth, to purchase it; and he was a true Merchant; for unto such a one is the kingdome of heaven compared. The young man (in the same Gospell) was willed to doe the same, but being not willing therevnto, he kept his base earthly trash, and for want of the true treasure, he soone became bankrupt, and lost the wealth of heaven, to gaine the pelfe of the worlde. Yea our Saviour Christ, who knowe’s how to enrich vs absolutely, perswades all men to this practise, to sell all, and provide them bags of such treasure as cannot faile. (1622: 69)

Wing interestingly mentions the “things” sold as well.

The fore-named Merchant who is soe magnified in the gospell, is sayd to sell all to buy that Pearle: loe, he solde all; what all? even all that he had; why, what had he to
sell of his owne, (being a sinner) but sin? who bought it? why, even he of whome he had the Pearle; and soe with the sale of all his sins (how many, or, how monstrous soever) he parted with them, and made purchase of this invaluable gemme. (1622: 74)

In this quote one can see that the author states that a human cannot “sell” anything else but his own sins, give his own life to Christianity, that being the highest “price” a man can pay for this “gem”.

He not only wrote about this but warns that the merchant should not forget about his religion, even if he is very busy. The merchant is so encumbred with many things that he knowe’s not which way to turne him: here arive’s a ship from the East Indies, there’s another outward bound for the VWest, some are expected from the North-seas, others from the South; he hath to doe beyond the straight of Magellan, and in those neerer straights of the Mediterranean; the gulfe of Persia, and of Venice, the Grand-Canaryes, and Molluccoes, all have some what of his; no winde blowe’s but he hopes for some good, from our place or other; here he is merchant, there owner; and every where an ensurer; and thus, man wraps himself into a labarynth & maze of fadeing merchandise, and become’s a kinde of Vbiquitarie (as it were) in his business. (Wing 1622: 96-97)

His text particularly brings a parallel and comparison between civil, human trade and “heavenly trade”, which wishes to cover the connection between God and man.

That wheras in all civill barters which are made betweene man and man, one good thing is set against another, and one commodity is exchanged for another: In this blessed tradeing it is not soe, but in the barters betweene God and man, the Lord give’s vs good for evill, and putt’s his graces vpon vs, for the jmpietyes we put of to him. (Wing 1622: 80)

The prerequisite of trade is goods, but the author warns that the people need to pay attention to their “quality”: “Howbeit yov most know that, this is not the merchandise meant here in our text, all bad wares come out of the Divells warehouse, and his they are. Now because they are soe deceivably made, as that such multitudes are gul’d with them” (Wing 1622: 46).

The heavenly product is of course totally different from the mundane. “This merchandise doth not consist of any such moveables, as may be shipt from one port to another, or transported from one person, to another: noe man hath any power either buy from another or, to sell to another, in this trade, wherin all our dealing (touching the attayning of anything, or parting with it) is onely, and wholly with GOD himselfe” (Wing 1622: 63). He also explains that “it is not read in all Gods booke, that ever he solde any goodnes to any man,
but that which we have from him, is everywhere called his free and must gracious gift vnto vs” (Wing 1622: 10-11) and that “this merchandise is (in this respect) farre better then the merchädis of Golde or siluer, because here is no occasion of discomfort to any credditor” (Wing 1622: 41). So to say, no mundane product can replace salvation.

Neither is the author forgetful about the dangers that may affect the merchants. Here is a foure-folde danger, the hassard at sea is much, trusting of it in sale is as much, many times your goods are ill conditioned, and some servants are dishonestly mynded: these are the meanes of many a merchants miscarriage, and vndoeing […] All tradeing vnder heaven, in to all clymates, in all commodityes, is more or lesse vnceartaine, and dangerous, & in the richest, and rarest, there is most feare, because they are in places farthest remote. But in this trade which is from heaven, it is nothing soe. (Wing 1622: 23)

Neither does he forget to mention that Protestant traders as heavenly merchants have their “sinful” rivals. “For there is a crew of vpstart TRADERS, or rather INTRVDERS, I meane Papists, & Arminiäs (I joyne them together, though the one be much yonger then the other, yet are both, late vices in respect of the ancient truth of God) who meddle, (or rather Peddle) in Gods merchandis” (Wing 1622: 31). He also explains that not only are they in danger but also humanity. “And these mysticall sotts doe suffer (nay joy to see) themselves miserably abused by these Catholike Inglers of whome they thinke they doe receive, the ernaments of Christ, whenas they have nothing but Antichristian excrements, and soe in steed of adorneing and bewtifying their soules, they doe defile & abase them out of measure” (Wing 1622: 17).

In addition, he also explains why it is important to “trade” with heaven. “Noe man is borne a naturall merchant, neither can any be naturally religious, it must be sought, it must be bought, we must be trayned vp in this trade of heaven, this cunning comes not by kinde, it will coste time, and paynes, to be well seene into this science. We must be heavenly merchants, if we wil hope to be happy men” (Wing 1622: 8-9). “Gods merchandise is better then man’s: […] it is better being a Trader for wisdome then for wealth, for Grace, then for Goods, His commerce with vs, doth farre exceede ours with one another, and wilbe founde (every way) infinitely more beneficiall” (Wing 1622: 20).

William Gostwyke also processes the story of the merchant and the pearl in his sermon starting The Christian Merchant, which was published in 1696.

By the first account, the Happiness of Heaven to a Christian is like a Pearl of great Price to a Merchant-Man […] Church of Christ in gaining Heaven is like a Company of Merchant-men purchasing a Pearl of great Price. Or more particularly, and plainly
thus. The good Christian aiming hereafter at Heaven is like a Merchant pursuing his best Interests here on Earth. *Sensus, duplex, & uterque probandus*. Both Senses are sound, both good, and not unlikely both intended by our great Master [...] The Complete Christian is very like a well accomplisht Merchant [...] They seek alike, they find alike, alike they sell all, to make a purse, or one grand Purchase at last; that is, contentedly part with anything of lower price, to get higher, till they can reach the Top, and compass the Sum total of their Happiness once for all. (1696: 3-4)

He emphasizes what he thinks the common feature between the Christian and the Merchant is, which he thinks is determination. “A Merchant then is a Vertuous, and Valuable Person, of great and uninterrupted Dealings, abroad, and at home, with design to make himself, and to make others happy. This I take the Merchant to be; And this with a very easie Turn is the Christian too” (Gostwyke 1696: 4). “He seeks as readily and far forth as any man; he’ll find, or make a pass *per Mare, per Terras* to the remotest Indies, or round the Universe, but it shall be for goodly Pearl, or what’s as good” (Gostwyke 1696: 12).

A lot of chaplains did not only concentrate on sea voyages and not only wrote for the sailors and the merchants but also wrote the sermons to the individuals on top of the hierarchy and warned about the duties, dangers and advantages of trade and what a good Christian merchant is like. Gostwyke’s main aim was the same, to bring attention to how a good Christian trader works and what duties they have. “The Merchant is an Adventurer, the Christian on a sure Foundation: the Merchant may lose much, lose all he has, nay lose himself after all. But the good Christian except he will himself, can never lose his Aim” (1696: 24).

The author sums up the Christian’s advantages above the merchant.

In the nature, and so value of the things they deal in and for. The Merchant is for *Cedar, Ivory, and Arras; for Mettles, Spices, Jewels*; the rich Furniture of others, and his own house: The Ornament, and well-being but of the Body at best. The Christian is for what, nor Moth, nor Rust will touch, nor Thief can take; the Ornament of a meek, and gracious Spirit: and the Salvation of his immortal Soul [...] The Merchant must go, and come, must tread the Wine-press alone, do his business himself, or ’twill go on but heavily, or not at all. The Christian has great Assistance, and helps for his Infirmities. (Gostwyke 1696: 23-24)

In a thanksgiving sermon written for the Virginia Company and published in 1622, Patrick Copland writes about the continuous “struggle” for survival of the sailors on the seas.

*Navigantes ne{que} inter vivos, ne{que} inter mortuous. Saylers are neither amongst the living, nor yet amongst the dead: as having but a few inches of planke between...*
them and Death, they hang betwixteen both; ready to offer vp their Soules to every flaw of wind, and billow of water wherein they are tossed. The immoveable rocks, and the mutable windes; the ouerflowing waters, and swallowing sands; the tempestuous stormes, & spoyling Pyrats haue their liues at their mercy and commaund. Mariners living in the Sea, almost as fishes, hauing the waters as their necessariest Element [...] when Life and Soule are readie to shake hands, and depart this present world; then, euen these nought-fearing fellowes, these high stomaked men tremble for feare like faint-hearted women that shrink at euery stirre in a wherrie on the River of Thames in a rough and boysterous Tyde: or like vnto a yong Souldier, which starteth at the shooting off of a Gun. (Copland 1622: 3-4)

Copland warns the merchants and colonists that however important religion and trade are, they should not forget about dangers that do not necessarily appear instantly:

Our Countrey aboundeth with people; your Colony wanteth them: you all know that there is nothing more dangerous for the estate of Commonwealths, then when the people doe increase to a greater number and multitude [...] yet if it abound in greater quantitie, then the vessell and state of the body will contayne and beare, doeth indanger the body, and oftentimes destroyes it: so although the honour of a King be in the multitude of people (as wise King Salomon speaketh) yet when this multitude of people increaseth to ouer great a number, the common wealth stands subjicet to many perillous inconneniences, as famine, pouerty, and sundry other sorts of calamities. (1622: 30-31)

Sometimes the employed chaplain attended a voyage or could stay in the given overseas territory and live through the dangers he prayed to evade.

Will ye not beleue in what Danger we were, when some of vs made Shipwracke vpon the supposed inchanted Ilands; when others of vs encountred with bloudie enemies in the West Indies; when many of vs dyed by the way; and when those that were left alieue, some perished a shore, for want of comfortable prouisions, and looking vnto, and others were killed with the Bowes and Arrows of the Savages vpon our first landing there. (Copland 1622: 8-9)

Though in this same sermon the author mentions a more positive experience of his own.

I might heere speake something touching my owne experience, of the willingnesse of the Heathens in genrall in all the Easterne parts of the world, where I haue trauailed, how ready they are to receiue the Gospel, if there were but Preachers amongst them that could and would instruct them by their Doctrine and Life. And of one of them in
speciall, which I brought with me out of India to England, and taught him (I not being able to speak otherwise to him, nor he to mee, but by signes,) to speake, to reade and write the English tongue and hand, both Romane and Secretary, within lesse then the space of a yeare, so that his Maiestie and many of the Nobilitie wondered at his hand; and within the compasse of three yeares, I taught him the grounds of Religion, and to learn most of Saint Pales Epistles by heart, and to giue a publique confession of his Faith the day hee was baptized in a famous assembly heere in the Cittie, before the right worshipfull the East India Company. (Copland 1622: 29-30)

Nathaniel Hardy draws attention to God’s presence through the story of Jacob in his sermon published in 1659. “He that keeps the sea from over-running the earth, can keep us from miscarrying; though it be by sea, neither waves nor winds can hurt him whom God will preserve; and therefore in our greatest straits let us not cast away our confidence, but exercise our devotion, praying to God with Jacob here, that he would keep us in the way we go” (1659: 32-33). He explains that there is danger everywhere but there is no need to worry.

There are but two wayes wherein any man can go, either the earth or the water, the land or the sea, and both are perillous. As for the earth, that indeed is steady, but our footing on it is not steady; many have stumbled upon plain ground: and as for the perils of the water, they are both manifold and manifest. By land we meet with hills and desarts, bogs and theeves: by sea we are tost with tempests, assaulted by pirats, run upon the sands, and dash against the rocks. I speak not this to discourage any from going that way to which God calls them, though it be never so long a voyage by sea, which yet seems to be more dangerous than the land. It is a pretty story of him, who saying That his Father, Grandfather, and great Grandfather died at sea; and being asked, Why then do you go to sea? Replied, Where did your Father, Grandfather, and great Grandfather die? and being answered, In their beds; Wittily retorted, Why then do you go to bed? The truth is, there is no just reason to be more timorous, at least not more anxious, when we go by sea, than when we go by land; but withall, so great is the peril of both, that we stand in need of being kept. And this Jacob well knew (Hardy 1659: 29).

He offers the following summary: “We are neither safe without him, nor in danger with him” (Hardy 1659: 32).

He describes God as a friend in his text.

Homo gaudet de propinquitate amici, every man is glad to have his friend near him. If a man be on a journey, the Company of a stranger is acceptable, but of a friend is most
desirable. Jacob knew the Lord, his Grandfather Abraham, his Father Isaac and himself had found him to be a sure, a fast friend; can you blame him to desire his society? No friends to a man in any difficulty like a good God and a good conscience. (Hardy 1659: 27)

Although he also explains that “Orare is to little purpose without Laborare: in all dangers, as thou lifttest up thy eyes to God for his succour, so thou must put forth thy hand to the means of self-preservation” (Hardy 1659: 48). He reminds the reader that

*When we expect extraordinary favours, it is but reasonable we should vow some eminent service. That Merchant did very well in making (had he done as well in keeping) his vow, who being in apparent danger of losing his ship, goods, life, by a violent storm, vowed to Jupiter if he would bring him safe to shore, Hecatombs of sacrifices to be offered upon his Altar. Our Saviour saith, To whom much is given, of him much shall be required: it is no less true, God looketh for much from him who expects much from God.* (Hardy 1659: 18)

It is important that the merchants do not only consider their own religiousness. “Nor let this onely be your personall care, but what lieth in you take care that those who are under you may serve the Lord, so as the glorious name of God and Christ may not be blasphemed among the Indians by the prophan, intemperate and unclean lives of English Christians” (Hardy 1659: 51).

Besides the issues mentioned so far, the return to the motherland is not to be forgotten in the sermons. “The great design of strangers, is to view the pleasantness of another Land, the temper and manners of the people, the Laws and Government of a countrey; and after the diversion of a different climate, to return back to their own native air and soyle” (Rainstorp 1684: 4). Hardy also thoroughly explains this.

There is implanted in every man by *nature a love* of his Fathers-house, his native soyl, where (as Lipsius elegantly phraseth it) we drew our *first breath*, and our feet did *first tread*; where our *infancy* flourished, *childhood* played, and *youth* was educated; where the *Heavens*, the *Rivers*, by often view have become *familiar* to us; where of a long time our *kindred*, *friends & companions* have lived: In a word, where there are those *objects of content*, which in *vain* we seek for any where else […] A stately *palace* in another Land (to allude to Homers expression) is not so *pleasing* as a mans *Fathers house*, though it be a *cottage* […] When men are in *forrain* parts, (whether it be by *forcible* compulsion, or *voluntary* consent) they cannot choose but often *think* of their *fathers house*: *De loco peregrinationis proprii domicilii crescit affectus, Our love to*
our home increaseth by our absence from it: And therefore it is when we are abroad in our persons, we are at home in our thoughts [...] As they that are at Sea do often look towards the shore, and long for the Land: Sic ii qui in peregrinis locis ad patriam suam aspirant, saith Lipsius, so do Pilgrims and Travellers seek after their own Country. (Hardy 1659: 38-40)

It is not to be forgotten that the English East India Company worked through the English Civil War and the years of the Republic. After the Stuart Restoration they gained a new charter from Charles II., which dates his regime from the death of Charles I. and thus the time of the interregnum, “disappeared”, although the Company did work with the Cromwellian government. It is also interesting that under the time of the interregnum the English East India Company built a chapel in England. It was built in 1654 and named Poplar Chapel (later St. Matthias Old Church and today it works as a community centre). It was built because the nearest church to the Blackwall shipyard was too far away for the employees. The Company also maintained a hospital and a pensioners’ home for their retired personnel.

In later sermons the time of the Republic appears: “And we ourselves alass! are too sensible what a Blow England receiv’d at the dismal Stroak given to our late Sovereign, what a black brand of Infamy was affixed on that score, how odious an English Man sounded in other Countreys, honour’d with no greater Title, then that of a Devil” (Rainstorp 1684: 20-21). In others the writers draw the attention to the peace of the country:

Finally, not onely that you may come to your Native Country in peace, but, that when you come again, you may find it in peace, the breaches of Church and State healed, every one enjoying his rights in quiet, sitting under his own fig-tree, and eating the fruit of his labours with joy and thankfulnesse: and let all that wish well to you, to the Church, to the Land, say Amen, Amen. (Hardy 1659: 52)

The latter quote is from a sermon published in 1659, that is why it is interesting that the author mentions the quarrel between the State and the Church.

**Conclusion**

By the 17th century the first wave of the Reformation had “calmed down”, but it was far from its “final” form. English Protestantism was diverse, which can be seen from the Civil War and the emigrations to the New World. The maintenance of the “official” English Protestant, later known as the Anglican community was also important, in the motherland as overseas, in places where larger or smaller groups of this religion arrived either for settlement or trade.
For the contemporary economic and commercial companies, amongst them the English East India Company, religion was also important and this can be seen through employing chaplains, supporting charitable activities and financing the translating and writing of religious texts. These Protestant texts were written in different genres – guides, sermons, prayers were created, to which the Reformation and sometimes the “remnants” of Catholic ideas gave the fulcrum.

Since this article mainly concentrates on the sermons written for mariners, it can be seen that within these texts the recurring topoi and metaphors are usually linked to the Bible’s verses relating to merchandise and fishermen dealing with the whims of the sea. With time, some sermons included the different religious and political backgrounds to emphasize the “greatness” of their own denomination.

The society of the age was on the verge of a new world order due to the ongoing discoveries. The changing world affected societies differently, some were conquered, others became conquerors. With the different religious, cultural, socio-economic spheres entangling evermore the authors of the sermons written for those whom were exploring and travelling overseas sought to secure their denominations’ worshippers’ Christianity.

Works Cited


BL, IOR ‘Rules to be observed by all Englishmen that live in the factory of Sratt’, 2 July 1696, G/36/95. fo.47


Copland, Patrick – Pope, Peter (Papa, Petrus) (1622). *Virginia’s God be thanked, or A sermon of thanksgiving for the happie successe of the affayres in Virginia this last yeare. Preached by Patrick Copland at Bow-Church in Cheapside, before the Honorable Virginia Company, on Thursday, the 18. of April 1622. And now published by the commandement of the said honorable Company. Hereunto are adjoyned some epistles, written first in Latine (and now Englished) in the East Indies by Peter Pope, an Indian youth, borne in the bay of Bengala, who was first taught and converted by the said P.C. And after baptized by Master Iohn Wood, Dr in Divinitie, in a famous assembly before the Right Worshipfull, the East India Company, at S. Denis in Fan-Church streete in London, December 22. 1616, Printed by I. D. for William Sheffard and Iohn Bellamie, and are to be sold at his shop at the two Greyhounds in Corne-hill, neere the Royall Exchange. London: I.D.*


Terry, Edward (1649). *The merchants and mariners preservation and thanksgiving. Or, Thankfulness returned, for merces received Set forth in a sermon of thanksgiving, preached at S. Andrews Undershchaft, Sept. 6. 1649. To the r. worshipfull, the Comittee of Merchants, trading for the eastern India, upon a late returne of seven of their ships together. By Edvvard Terry, minister of the Word, (who was sometime in their service, there) now rector of the Church of Great-Greenford, in the county of Middlesex. Octob. 4. 1649. Imprimatur. John Downname*. London: Thomas Harper.

Wing, John, of Flushing, Zealand (1622). *The Best Merchandise or, A cleare discovery of the evident difference, and admirable advantage, betweene our traffike with God, for the true treasure; and with men, for temporall commodity VVherein is shevved that our spirituall trading is both free from all the evill, & full of all the good, which is incident to civill commerce; yea, that it overfloweth with divers excellent prerogatives, which the affayres of the earth cannot yeelde. Preached at Middleburgh in Zeelandt, immediately before the remoovall, of the famous fellowship of Merchant Adventurers of England, from thence, vnto
Delft, in Hollandt. And now published, and dedicated, to the honour and vse, of that whole society, there, or other where, residing. By Iohn VVing, a true harted wellwiller, to their temporall, and eternall good, with God and men. Flushing: Martin Abraham vander Nolck.

Received: 25 September 2023 Final version accepted: 30 November 2023

Noémi Harding is finishing her PhD in History, specializing in the religious world of the English East India Company in the 17th century. Her research mainly focuses on the English religious communities overseas and 17th century marine sermons. harding.naomi@gmail.com