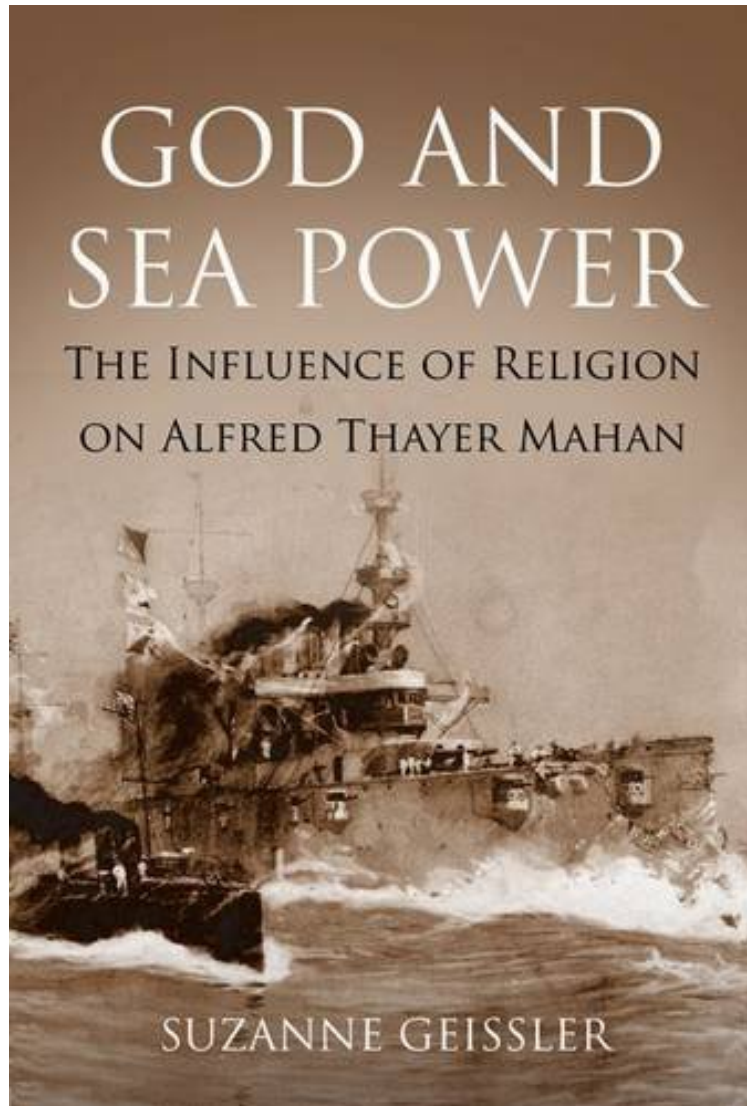


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# God and Sea Power: The Influence of Religion on Alfred Thayer Mahan

*Suzanne Geissler*

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**Suzanne Geissler : God and Sea Power: The Influence of Religion on Alfred Thayer Mahan** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised God and Sea Power: The Influence of Religion on Alfred Thayer Mahan:

0 of 1 people found the following review helpful. NAUTICAL APOSTLE of PEACE By Vincent- ATM was named "Apostle of Peace" in the book.- ATM buried in civilian clothes; to show no ranks in heaven.- ATM's tombstone

etched with no rank; but yes, had the referred for the USN.- ATM plaque, in the Long Island church, however, prints ATM's rank. My pray for all shipmates -Fair winds and following seas! 2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. The Christian Neptune By Anson Cassel Mills I still find it surprising that Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840-1914), the late 19th-century apostle of sea power, could also have written *The Harvest Within: Thoughts on the Life of the Christian* (1909). As Suzanne Geissler notes in her introduction, previous biographers of Mahan have either ignored Mahan's deep religious faith or have treated it as a negative influence, a trait that made him arrogant and self-righteous. (4) In fact, if anything, Mahan's faith helped temper the less attractive aspects of his personality. Mahan's mature religion was one of seeming contradictions. Throughout his life he remained a fervent Episcopalian with a bent toward the High Church and aversion to liturgical reform. Yet he also appears to have undergone a conversion experience about 1871, when he realized that he could only experience God's favor, not through his own merits, but through trust in the completed work of Christ on the cross. (72) The author calls one of his later addresses to an Episcopal parish almost evangelical, albeit of the dignified stiff-upper-lip variety. (149) And Mahan never mentioned the conversion in his autobiography. As for the influence Mahan's religion might have played on his notions of sea power, the evidence is even less certain. Mahan believed in divine sovereignty in history, but when push came to shove, his Providence looked much like Alexander Pope's *Whatever is, is right*. The other possible religious influence on his naval theories was his belief in human depravity, an unpopular notion among contemporary intellectuals that is, before the Great War made cynics of them all. Perhaps Mahan would not have conceived a satisfying theory of sea power if he had not held an underlying belief in original sin. (Military historians will never go wrong when headed in that direction.) At the very least, Mahan's religious beliefs led him to a suitable marriage and increased his already stout work ethic. Geissler provides considerable new information about Mahan, and despite occasional repetitions, she writes sensibly if not with sparkle. Nevertheless, as one of my old profs once told me, you should fight your historiographical battles in the notes. Geissler is so eager to get justice for Mahan that much of the book reads like an extended critique usually legitimate, it must be admitted of Robert Seager II, *Alfred Thayer Mahan: The Man and His Letters* (1977), a biography written out of an intense, even visceral, dislike for Mahan. (3) 2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. *How Faith Changed the History and Projection of Sea Power* By William Struse I can still remember the pleasure I had reading the stories, *Carry On, Mr. Bowditch* and *Anchors Away* written by Jean Lee Latham. These thrilling sea stories written about the naval heroes Nathaniel Bowditch and David Glasgow Farragut were my first introduction to United States naval history as a young boy. Now many years later I am once again thrilled to read another book about United States naval history. This time it was the biography of Alfred Thayer Mahan, one of the most, if not the most influential naval thinker and historian in United States history. In this well written book, *God And Sea Power*, author Suzanne Geissler writes a fascinating biography of Mahan but from the perspective of how his faith influenced his life as a man, historian and patriotic citizen. Now if you are expecting a hack job, which seeks to paint a caricature of Mahan's faith as seen through a prism of today's politically correct secularism you'll be rather disappointed. Instead Suzanne Geissler takes a reasonable look at Alfred Mahan's faith in the context of the day in which he lived. I found this book to be an engaging read which provided much food for thought, especially as it relates to Mahan's view on religion and its place in government. Mahan also had some pretty prescient thoughts on the dangers of the consolidation of power in the political, social and economic realms of society. As Geissler describes it Mahan believed this trend was a clear and present danger because it quashed individual freedom, initiative, and independence and concentrated power in the hands of a few. Reading this book was several hours well spent.

Gallons of ink have been used analyzing Adm. Alfred Thayer Mahan's thoughts, his naval theories, and his contribution to sea power. One vital aspect of his life, however, has been ignored or misunderstood by many scholars: his religious faith. Mahan was a professing Christian who took his faith with the utmost seriousness, and as a result, his worldview was inherently Christian. He wrote and spoke extensively on religious issues, a point frequently ignored by many historians. This is a fundamental mistake, for a deeper and more accurate understanding of Mahan as a person and as a naval theorist can be gained by a meaningful examination of his religious beliefs. *God and Sea Power* is the first work to examine in a detailed and contextual way how Mahan's faith influenced his views on war, politics, and foreign relations.

Suzanne Geissler has accomplished what she set out to do. She has rescued Alfred Mahan from the agendas of contemporary historians and allowed us to see him for who he was in his own day. *Fides et Historia* Suzanne Geissler has two major arguments in her excellent new biography of famed naval historian and sea power theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan. The first posits that one cannot understand the work of Mahan if one does not understand the Christian faith that informed it; the two were inseparable. The second argument is historiographic and follows from the first, that other scholars have ignored or misunderstood Mahan's religious faith as manifested in his writings and activities in the Episcopal Church. U.S. Military History Geissler's analysis of Mahan's religion and its influence is essential reading for scholars and others interested in the life and global influence of this prominent historical actor. Students of military history, diplomatic history, and US empire will find Geissler's work especially helpful and informative. H-Net Geissler

offers readers a view of Mahan through a different lens. Based on her findings and interpretations of primary sources, Mahan was heavily influenced by his faith. By skillfully contrasting the popular view of Mahan with the deeply religious Mahan, the author has certainly provided more food for thought for historians, Mahan enthusiasts, and the general public alike.

*Sea History*"An interesting new approach to analysing Mahan that provides a useful insight into his character formation."

*Baird Maritime Australia*For those of us who have had to confront radical Islam and jihadism over the past two decades, and who also have experience serving at sea where one can often feel in need of a prayer or two to ride out the tempest it is possible to recognize the importance of religion on understanding, and upon strategy. It is this understanding and approach that makes Geisslers book so eminently readable. The Navy, Navy League of Australia

The rise of Mahan as a naval theorist and the United States as an international sea power coincided with the great Christian global missionary endeavours of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Suzanne Geisslers meticulous research and flowing narrative demonstrate well the linkage between Alfred Thayer Mahans devout, active, and public faith as an Episcopalian layperson and his thought as a strategist. Mahans Christian faith and religious beliefs greatly influenced his views. Geisslers work clearly demonstrates that ideas do not arise in a vacuum and that values have consequences.

Timothy J. Demy, ThD, PhD, former Navy chaplain and current professor of military ethics, U.S. Naval War College

Suzanne Geissler provides a comprehensive explanation of how religion came to be central to the lives of the Mahan family and the difficulties it caused Alfred Thayer, especially during his years as a junior officer. Geissler also explains how religion influenced Mahans approach to writing and pays some attention to his copious output on religious matters especially after his retirement from the Navy. for readers who are familiar with Mahans writings it provides a very thorough examination of his philosophy and character. It clearly elucidates a man of deep spiritual conviction, whose Christianity was evident in all that he did. It also demonstrates that Mahans faith was both strict and uncompromising.

*Australian Naval Institute*"For many of us, Alfred Thayer Mahan is certainly no stranger. His theories and writings have been talked about and analyzed for years. They have been savored by everyone from the President of the United States, the lowly Naval War College graduate, and many others around the world. Thus, it is always refreshing to read something new and interesting about this well-known and often talked about historical figure. Suzanne Geissler has done just that. Professor Geissler has delivered some fresh insights and probably stirred some debate with her new book, *God and Seapower*. The book is a fascinating look into Mahans life by focusing on his religious beliefs. At 280 pages this book is a nice size; something that can be read in a week and yet she still manages to cover ATMs life, from childhood to wise naval theorist, quite nicely."

*CIMSEC.org*By understanding Mahan as a Christian, we can not only see how his career, his theories, and his life developed over time, but also understand religions influence on one of the greatest naval minds in history. Geisslers biography seamlessly weaves together Mahans childhood in the Episcopal environment of his father and his uncle. This backdrop set the stage for the internal struggle that so frequently plagued Mahans mind, yet at the same time brought him back to his faith after each stumble. By demonstrating his resilience as a flawed man of conviction, Geissler truly highlights a portion of the respected strategists character that few students of Mahan have covered.

*The Strategy Bridge.com*"The book is very well researched and written. It brings new light into the life of Alfred Mahan that fills out the whole character of the man. That Mahan was one of the great naval thinkers is not in doubt, but this book brings out some of the reasons he was so devoted to his writing and his life."

*Starshell, Naval Association of Canada*"... delivers useful insights into Alfred Thayer Mahan from an understudied perspective and represents an essential companion to earlier general biographies."

*Journal of Military History*"Suzanne Geisslers *God and Sea Power* is a delightful, well-researched, and fascinating book; a work that should be added to the canon about Americas Apostle of Seapower, Alfred Thayer Mahan. It is deeply biographical, concerning itself primarily with the mans Christian life, albeit a Christian life lived through a sea-going career and later a life of academic and contemplative work."

*WarOnTheRocks.com*"Dr. Geissler offers something that is all too uncommon in the biographies of the great strategists and theorists: a study of the human being. This book offers a look at Mahan in a different light, offering insights on not only his thinking but also his character. It's refreshing and important to examine these elements of the intellectual god-father of sea power."

Benjamin Armstrong, editor of *21st Century Mahan* and *21st Century Sims*By delving into Mahans religious and family life and their influence on his world outlook, Geissler has produced a work destined to become the standard biography of the great naval theorist. The Mahan of this sophisticated, balanced, and nuanced study differs significantly from the misfit young naval officer, imperialist, and militarist depicted by Robert Seager and the one-dimensional author described by William D. Puleston, both of whom either ignored or failed to understand the depth and impact of Mahans Episcopalian faith.

James C. Bradford, professor of history, Texas AM University

This revealing biography opens a new window onto the religious life of Americas foremost naval strategist and advocate of sea power. Naval officers, military historians, and strategists alike stand to learn much from Suzanne Geisslers examination of the often overlooked religious influences and insights of Alfred Thayer Mahan. Chaplains and scholars of religion will benefit from her in-depth study of Mahans personal faith and his various theological and ecclesiastical interventions following his military career. Finally, historians will appreciate how Mahan an esteemed historian and former president of the American Historical Association would himself become such an intriguing subject of history. While shaped by his own times, he fully engaged political, cultural, and religious debates and issues that

defined this era. Cdr. John D. Carlson, USNR, associate professor of religious studies, Arizona State University

About the Author Suzanne Geissler holds masters degrees in history and theology from Rutgers University and Drew University, respectively. She received her PhD in history from Syracuse Universitys Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs. Geissler is professor of history at William Paterson University in Wayne, New Jersey.