

The story of the ship's master and 'the God switch'

ON THE bridge, above the wheel, the gyro compass was positioned as usual.

The helmsman kept a watchful eye on his most important instrument. Next to it was a small wooden box that I did not recognise. Another thing that caught my attention was one of the labels on a light switch on a bridge console. Translating from the Kanji character, I was sure that it read 'the God switch'. Intrigued, I asked the helmsman if I was right, to which he replied "yes" and proceeded to tell me about the ship's master and how he normally behaved.

When all was well with the voyage, the master was like anyone else, relaxed and professional. However, on occasions he would become nervous if, for some reason, the ship was not responding to his commands in a way that satisfied him. It could be during especially bad weather, or fast tides, or if machinery was sounding strained or if manoeuvring was not as it should be. At that time, the master would put on 'the God switch'. With that, the wooden box next to the gyro compass would be bathed in a bright light. This wooden box was in fact a small Shinto shrine, a holy symbol, a focus for prayer. When the master felt that all was well 'the God switch' would be turned off, and the shrine would pass into the shadow of the gyro compass.

This is indicative of many relationships with God. Many

people like to feel in control. Intelligent as we are, professional and competent, we can organise, and arrange. We can design equipment to keep us safe. We can produce very sophisticated modes of transport, and we can live in a very technologically sophisticated environment. We feel secure. Yet when something goes horribly wrong or we may not be in control, or we are reminded that many things are outside of our understanding, we feel uneasy, uncomfortable and disconcerted. In such circumstances, and especially when we suffer, are in pain, or witness the inhumanity of others, we pray, turning to God for reassurance or to deliver us from the things we are afraid of.

If we believe God has listened and delivered us from our distress, or when the situation around us has returned to a safe and understandable norm, we conveniently forget about God. In the usual course of life many do not want the inconvenience of recognising God and many do not want to acknowledge Him. It is inconvenient to set aside some time to think of God and to worship Him; that is an intrusion into our lives. We may prefer to switch God on and off as we desire. We may want to blame God when things go wrong and congratulate ourselves when we are successful.

Is this the basis of your relationship with your God? Do you switch Him on and off?