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On the night of 25-26 April, 1986, one of the four nuclear reactors at Chernobyl in the north of Ukraine exploded. According to a conservative estimate, it released a hundred times more radiation than the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Shifting winds carried the radioactivity not just over Ukraine, Belarus and parts of Russia, but over much of Europe, especially Poland and Sweden, and even England and the United States...

The Chernobyl incident has become more significant currently because of the new debate about nuclear energy as a way of reducing global warming. There is a concerted campaign to expand our mining and sales of uranium, and perhaps even to build nuclear energy plants in Australia.

In this article, part 2 of [Lessons from Chernobyl](#), the question is asked:

Is nuclear energy the answer?

by Bruce Duncan CSsR

There can now be no reasonable doubt that we face an unprecedented environmental crisis with global warming, and it has become absolutely critical that we reduce carbon gas emissions. Nuclear energy is seen as a quick answer to this problem. France already uses nuclear power to produce 80 per cent of its electricity.

Worldwide in 2005 there were 441 nuclear power stations in 31 countries. Fully 291 have been operating for more than 20 years, with 16 of the same type as Chernobyl. A further 25 reactors are under construction. In Ukraine itself, a moratorium on new nuclear plants was lifted in 1992 because of its acute shortage of energy.

But consider this: if nuclear power plants had dotted Europe before the Second World War, they would have been prime military targets? If they had been destroyed, there would have been many disasters like Chernobyl, and worse, all over Europe. These would have rendered huge areas uninhabitable for thousands of years. Can we be confident that we will never have another war in countries with nuclear power plants, not just in Europe, but in Central Asia, China, India, the Middle East or North Africa?

Furthermore, we are still left with the dilemmas about

the danger of accidents like Chernobyl,

the increasingly serious risk from terrorist attacks,

the threat of uranium fuel finding its way into nuclear weapons in rogue states,

and

the safe disposal of wastes that will remain dangerous for tens of thousands of years. The problem of waste disposal has not been solved.

Moreover, despite claims to the contrary, nuclear energy is not cheap and reactors need massive support from taxpayers, including subsidies, to cover the cost of clean-ups and to guarantee insurance compensation payments beyond a certain amount. The costs of building reactors and mining ore are also significant contributors to greenhouse gases.

The problems are complex, but we should clearly recognise that nuclear energy offers no quick or easy answers to global warming, and poses enormous risks.

Uranium mining

The Chernobyl tragedy poses some specific questions for us in Australia about extending our uranium exports.

The moral question is one of cooperation in programs that may lead to calamitous outcomes. We cannot just disclaim responsibility for how our uranium might be used. How does one decide whether safeguards are adequate or not? Australia has recently renewed major sales of uranium to China, a country under tight communist control. In addition, our government has been sounding out public opinion on whether or not to sell uranium to India, a country that has not signed the nuclear proliferation treaty and has acquired nuclear weapons. How will selling our uranium to India not further damage the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty?

Australia has about 40 per cent of the world's known supply of uranium, and mining companies understandably want to sell as much as they can. But is it in the national interest to make some millions of dollars of profits at the risk of such great and possibly irreversible damage to human wellbeing and the environment?

The churches and social conscience

It is difficult to underestimate how critical are these decisions about nuclear power and weapons. If we make the wrong decisions, we will face truly apocalyptic scenarios, jeopardising the survival of perhaps millions of people.

Such decisions are not just technical, but profoundly moral. The Christian churches and other religious traditions have a special role to play in these decision-making processes. Religious groups have no monopoly on the social conscience of a nation of course, but certainly have an important role to play in helping form this conscience.

Religious leaders are understandably reluctant to engage in debate about such difficult and controversial issues as nuclear power and arms proliferation. Yet such great matters affecting the survival of so many people cannot be ignored. This does not mean that religious leaders can provide instant or easy answers to such complex matters, but they must be part of the conversation about the moral issues at the heart of these dilemmas; they can help provide platforms for honest and informed debate, and be prepared if necessary to challenge powerful special interests.

As the Cardinal of Los Angeles, Roger Mahoney, said recently of the Catholic Church at least, many US church leaders have been silent in the face of grave social issues, because of the effects of the sexual abuse crisis. He, of course, acknowledged how the sexual abuse crisis had gravely damaged the church's credibility, but insisted that the churches still have a duty to speak on critical social issues, and must not allow themselves to be silent.

On this anniversary of Chernobyl, we remember those who have suffered and continue to suffer from its effects, and we pray earnestly that we will learn the lessons well. Instead of looking to nuclear energy, we should be developing renewable energy sources, in conjunction with deep changes in our lifestyles. The fires of Chernobyl flared like a terrible beacon warning us to exercise extreme caution lest its fate be ours.

Bruce Duncan, a priest of the Redemptorist order, coordinates the program of social justice studies at Yarra Theological Union, in Melbourne, and is a consultant with Catholic Social Services Victoria. This is the second part of his address at the Ukrainian Catholic Cathedral, Melbourne, commemorating the 20th anniversary of the accident at Chernobyl.