

# Nuclear Power Draws Churches' Concern

"When today we enter into the discussion of the just and sustainable society, we must... have no illusions that we can 'solve' any of these problems. This applies especially to the rich countries which are the captives of their own power and the prisoners of their technological achievement. They cannot turn back the clock. The Pandora's box that they opened cannot be closed."

"It is not surprising then that all nations are perplexed about the direction to take; that some people, and not only youth, advocate stopping the drive toward greater technological power through moratoriums and through a return to simple life styles. Nor is it surprising that others believe that there is no recourse but to go on with technological endeavors, in the hope, increasingly dim, that some solution will turn up, that the scientists and technologists will prove to be wiser than we thought."

The above quotations from a World Council of Churches' report take on more than ironic -- they are frighteningly prophetic -- proportions in the wake of the breakdown at the nuclear reactor plant on Three Mile Island near Harrisburg, Pa. And the proportion of danger to humanity expands when it is realized that the United States alone houses 72 atomic plants, each with disaster potential.

Both the threat and the promise posed by technological society have formed the basis for an ambitious ecumenical undertaking -- a "World Conference on Faith, Science and the Future" organized by the Geneva-based World Council of Churches to be held July 12 to 24 at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology at Cambridge, Mass.

A preparatory handbook, entitled "Faith, Science and the Future," has been published in the United States by Fortress Press as a resource guide for the conference, which will bring together some 500 scientists, technologists, theologians and concerned church people.

They will be searching for fresh theological and ethical insights that might be applied both to problems faced by the world today as a result of scientific and technological advance -- and to the gains humanity might realize from that advance.

The agenda for the MIT meeting is heavy: presentations and discussion sessions will deal with topics ranging from theological and biblical interpretations of life to ethical aspects of the biological manipulation of life; the energy debate, currently so urgent and not soon to subside; questions of food production and distributions; population growth and control; and such far-reaching queries as those dealing with the impact of technology on governmental structure and its use in the political-power game.

As noted in the preparatory material for the World Council conference, the Churches didn't initiate the debate about the role of science and technology in present and future societies, "but they have become deeply involved in it."

The Churches have become increasingly more involved in the last decade.

In 1971, Earl D. C. Brewer of Emory University could charge with some justification that religion's age-old concern for the future is being absorbed by the secularists -- scientists, technologists, planners and artists. Western religion has always had the future as a central concern, he pointed out, through "visions, prophecies, dream interpretations, along with the themes of judgment, the Apocalypse, salvation and future life."

But, he said, as the year 2000 approaches, the studies of the future are the increasing concern not of religionists but of secularist scholars.

Such admonitions were not isolated. A scientist from the Sperry Rand Corp. chided a 1970 pastors' retreat of the American Lutheran Church that they must look to the future if they expect to have any impact on it.



**This montage of an atomic explosion combines with a silo-type structure at the Middletown, Pa. Three Mile Island Nuclear Plant to form a cross, symbolizing Christian concern for the disaster potential of technological accidents. Long an anxiety of Church leaders, the incident at the stricken facility has now brought all segments of society into the debate over the safety of nuclear power.**

Religious groups, said the scientist, Earl C. Joseph, "seem to be spending time rushing ahead to solve yesterday's problems tomorrow."

Gradually the "futurist" movement among the secularists -- given impetus by the worldwide best seller, *Future Shock*, by Alvin Toffler -- captured the attention of the churches.

The late Pope Paul VI was invited to address a World Conference on Research into the Future held in Rome in 1973.

The Catholic leader observed that while the conference was addressing itself to economic, demographic, cultural and technological aspects of the future, the Church, too, "as bearer of a transcendent and revealed doctrine, certainly has something to say

"She already possesses science concerning future and final realities, the science of eschatology... Yet there is no contradiction between the two forms of research. Indeed, the Church is deeply aware of the problems of the temporal and earthly future."

By 1977 the Southern Baptist Convention's unit on the family and special moral concerns was calling on President Jimmy Carter to convene a White House Conference on the Future.

This year has been one of particular religious focus on the future. The recent Religious Public Relations Council's 50th anniversary convention in New York, for instance, had as its theme, "Thinking in the Future Tense." The keynoter was futurist Edward B. Lindaman, president of Whitworth College in Spokane, Wash., and former director of program planning for the Apollo Spacecraft Project.

In addition, the year already has seen the completion of a unique and significant consultation on the church in future society -- unique because it was sponsored by the independent Lutheran Brotherhood insurance and fraternal benefit society and because it brought together participants from nine separate Lutheran Churches, which doesn't happen often.

The significance was mostly through the participation of some of the world's leading futurists, coming from scientific, sociological and theological spheres.

Held in February at Houston, the Lutheran gathering heard such speakers as the noted German "theologian of hope" Jurgen Moltmann declare that

the future of Christianity is in the personal and collective liberation of the oppressed and poor.

And another German speaker -- Dr. Robert Jungk of the West Berlin Center for Future Research -- had some comments particularly pertinent in today's Three Mile Island discussion. The world may be on the road to a new Holocaust, he warned, unless it learns to control "dangerous technologies" such as the nuclear industry. He told the Houston gathering: "We may have to abandon technologies when they prove too dangerous. The question of risks should be debated more openly."

The debate has now come into the open with all of the explosive force of an atom bomb. The accident at the nuclear reactor plant at Three Mile Island that threatened to force the evacuation of tens of thousands of persons came on the heels of the opening of a highly successful motion picture, "The China Syndrome." The film turned out to be an uncanny and frightening parallel to the actual happening in central Pennsylvania.

Such developments are bound to influence the churches. For several years now the National Council of Churches, the broad ecumenical agency of 32 member denominations, has been unable to agree on a stance vis-a-vis nuclear energy. A proposed position paper deemed anti-nuclear was returned for rewriting last spring by the NCC Governing Board.

A revised statement was scheduled for presentation to the Governing Board meeting in San Antonio, May 9 to 11, when it was to be debated in the context of a deeper and wider awareness as the result of the Three Mile Island incident.

The team drafting the proposed NCC policy statement believes that the country must find "alternative ways to meet our energy needs."

Following the Three Mile Island accident they issued a statement saying, "The incredible risk of long-term damage to genes and danger of cancer from this accident makes us again ask whether fallible human beings, who inevitably make mistakes, should be trying to use nuclear energy, where there is so little room for mistakes."

The NCC committee continued, "The moral dimensions are clear. Powers and principalities must be made to serve the public interest. The rights of future generations, whether genetic rights or others, must be protected. Technologies are not neutral, and must be designed in keeping with a Christian understanding of human fallibility and stewardship."

The consequences are grave. While there is disagreement over whether the risk is worth further development of nuclear resources in an energy-starved world, there is general scientific agreement on the probable damages should an accidental nuclear "meltdown" occur. The worst possible accident could claim 3,000 lives, 45,000 immediate injuries, 45,000 latent cancer fatalities and 248,000 other injuries, including genetic defects, according to scientists on both sides of the nuclear debate.

It is with such ghastly consequences in mind that religious discussion of the future assumed a sense of urgency.

The challenge was posed in a statement of the World Council of Churches 1975 Assembly at Nairobi, Kenya -- a basic document on the forthcoming MIT event. It declares:

"The responsibility that now confronts humanity is to make a deliberate transition to a sustainable global society in which science and technology will be mobilized to meet the basic physical and spiritual needs of people, to minimize human suffering and to create an environment which can sustain a decent quality of life for all peoples.

"This will involve a radical transformation of civilization, new technologies, new uses for technology and new global economic and political systems... The world has reached the end of a triumphalist era in the use and development of science and technology."