CSSR NEWS
Director’s Report

The CSSR: Past, Present, and Future
Bob Pollack

The Center for the Study of Science and Religion began in 1999 with a startup grant from the office of the Provost. The idea for it emerged from a confluence of two events, one personal and the other political. I had just agreed to give the Schoff Lectures for The University Seminars on a topic of my choice. I chose to consider my own religious life as a scientist in those lectures, which have since been published by Columbia University Press as “The Faith of Biology and The Biology of Faith”. In that decision, I saw that I needed a place for further discussion, and so I decided to create the CSSR for that purpose.

The political reason went back more than a century. My wife Amy’s great-grandmother had owned a large farm in what is now Slovakia. This farm was first appropriated by Hungarian fascists in the Anschluss when the region was called the Slovak Republic, then by the Nazis in World War II, then by the Soviets with the establishment of the Czech Soviet Socialist Republic in 1945. With the fall of the Soviet Union and the division of the C.S.S.R. into the Czech Republic and Slovakia in the early 1990s, I was determined to capture some recognition of our family’s lost connection to that farm. So in picking the name for my center, I chose one that carried the same initials as the Soviet satellite, the C.S.S.R. Try googling either CSSR or C.S.S.R., and you will get the CSSR first and then, only very much thereafter, the Czech Soviet Socialist Republic.

The CSSR has undertaken many adventures in its short history. These have given it many shapes and addresses, as one door has opened or another closed. Some of these doors have been physical links to neighboring institutions and centers, while others been more abstract portals, bringing the CSSR to many different ways of pondering the intersection of the natural world with the difficult task of knowing how to act well in any given situation.

The CSSR’s first location outside of the Department of Biological Sciences was a set of desks in a big room in Low Library. At various times thereafter it was linked to and located in the Department of Religion, the Martin Luther King building of The Riverside Church, Knox Hall of The Union Theological Seminary, and the Hogan Hall offices of the Earth Institute.

With Earth Institute affiliation came a capacity to put up our own CSSR website, to offer a novel series of public CSSR seminars and symposia, and to create field-work programs with neighboring communities. In that period the Earth Institute made it possible for the CSSR to bring on board Cynthia Peabody as Associate Director and Miranda Hawkins as Administrator. Their work, and their mentoring of our many student interns, has maintained the CSSR for the past six years, and has led to our website’s archive of public events, including a number of broadly interdisciplinary, well-attended symposia in the last five years.

Now, in its fifteenth year, the CSSR will return to its initial configuration. Beginning in the fall of 2014, it will be...
located once again in the Arts and Sciences. I will remain Director and I will be the sole administrator; once again all CSSR programs will be co-created with student interns and volunteers, and managed by them, as in the CSSR’s initial years. The differences from 1999 will be large, however.

Our student programs will be funded from the gifts of friends, as they have been for the past two years. Most wonderfully, among these gifts is an endowment from Harvey Krueger College ’51, Law ’54. The yield from that endowment has supported CSSR students in their work this year, and it will continue to do so in the future. Though the CSSR will return to an earlier structure, there are projects already underway that will continue speak to the ways that I have myself changed in the past fifteen years, taught as I have been by my colleagues and my students, to think self-reflectively about my own priorities in asking that initial question that forms the agenda of the CSSR:

If scientific data cannot answer the question of what is the good and the right thing to do in any given situation, where else but by inward self-reflection can the answer be found?

All projects of the CSSR in the upcoming academic year and beyond will depend on students’ willingness to learn from their work, and to write about themselves as well as their work when they summarize their work for the CSSR. The CSSR has convened a small group of faculty Advisors from various disciplines, so that it can assure every student in every project the opportunity to engage in some aspect of science, some study of religious or secular works involving moral judgments, and some self-reflection. In this context, in the 2014-2015 academic year the CSSR will offer a mix of curricular and experiential student programs, most already in place, but some new.

Experiential programs for AY14-15

AY, both semesters: Volunteer Program at the Terence Cardinal Cooke Hospital
Summer: Internship with the Medical Director of the Terence Cardinal Cooke Hospital
Summer: Unite for Sight, Internship in Public Health eye care, Ghana

Academic programs for AY14-15

AY, both semesters: University Seminar on Slavery and Memory
AY, both semesters: EEEB 4321, “Human Nature”
AY, both semesters: BIOL 3700, “Independent Clinical Research”
AY, both semesters: we have proposed a student-initiated research course for both summer and during the academic year: “Workshop on Science, the Humanities, and Self-Reflection”.

The future of CSSR’s public programs remains unpredictable; the CSSR currently has no outside grant support at all, nor do we foresee any likelihood of being competitive for such support without links to congenial and collaborative groups interested in sharing work and ideas.

As Director, I also hope to stabilize and extend the reach of the CSSR through affiliations in 2014 and beyond. I have begun to explore affiliations - with shared funding and shared seeking of funds - that might re-link the CSSR to those Centers and institutions in which I now hold an affiliated or adjunct faculty position: Columbia’s Department of Environmental, Evolutionary and Ecological Biology, Union Theological Seminary, and The Earth Institute at Columbia University.
In addition I have begun discussions about possible collaborative arrangements with colleagues at the Columbia Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race, the Columbia Center for Science and Society, The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, Communion and Liberation, and the Columbia Program in Science and Art of the School of the Arts. In all these conversations, I will have in mind what I have learned from the CSSR, my colleagues and my students in the past fifteen years.

I opened this essay with a story of the CSSR’s origins in the history of what was the late and unlamented C.S.S.R. Let me close with a quote from Vaclav Havel, the first President of the post-Soviet Czech Republic, from his 1979 book, “The Power of the Powerless.”

“A genuine, profound, and lasting change for the better – as I shall attempt to show – can no longer result from the victory (were such a victory possible) of any traditional political conception, which can ultimately be only external, that is, a structural or systemic conception. More than ever before, such a change will have to derive from human existence, from the fundamental reconstitution of people in the world, their relationships to themselves and to each other, and to the universe.”