IHR Fellows Program

2007-2008: The Humanities and Sustainability

On the Ambiguous Religious Roots of the Environmental Crisis

Visiting Fellow:

Lissa McCullough, Independent scholar; adjunct professor of Religious Studies

Affiliation:

Muhlenberg College

Abstract:

As an independent scholar based in Rome, Italy, trained in the history of Christian thought, the IHR Visiting Fellow position in “the humanities and sustainability” would offer an attractive occasion for me to research the relation between the deep-seated religious presuppositions of Western culture and its environmental praxis, with the constructive intention of asking how our fundamental worldview can evolve toward sustainability. Clearly, since powerful new forms of technological innovation have been the most immediate cause of what we know as “the environmental crisis,” to get to the source of the unsustainability of contemporary societies, we have to raise the question of technology. But to raise this question is to realize, with Heidegger, that technological invention is not simply or essentially a “technical” matter. To the contrary, in raising the question of technology, we enter a highly complex field for humanistic research and philosophical reflection. Technological invention is an expression of the depths of a human culture, and it follows that the history of technology is a history of cultural innovation.

The purpose of my project is to probe, historically and philosophically, the deep-seated religious beliefs, presuppositions, motives, and practices that have preconditioned and fostered the development of Western technological culture, and to reflect on how we might transform our root attitudes to the natural world, and our relationship with it as embodied in technology, with a view to achieving sustainability. My primary aim while a Visiting Fellow would be to research and prepare for publication a scholarly article to be submitted to a journal such as Journal of the History of Ideas; a concurrent goal would be to explore how this work may lead to a more extensive book-length project. Methodologically, this research would aim to achieve a careful integration of multidisciplinary historical research into the religious roots of technological culture, leading into critical-constructive philosophical reflection on how we can become self-reflective and self-transforming in light of this deeply consequential and “unsustainable” history.

The argument that advances in technological culture were deeply rooted in Western religious beliefs and practices will come as no surprise to anyone familiar with Lynn White’s historical work, including his thesis in “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis” (1967). But where White’s argument concentrated on interpretation of Genesis 1, in which God grants “dominion” over the earth
to Adam, my proposal is that the biblically grounded theology of Augustine—the most influential and foundational theology of the Western Christian world—can give us a second, historically crucial “data point” for considering the validity of the White thesis. Here I focus on Augustine’s position on “use” (utor) versus “enjoyment” (fruor): the things of this world are strictly to be “used” to achieve salvation, only God is to be “enjoyed” as an end in himself. God’s absolute transcendence constitutes a teleological monopoly that devalues the actual world as having no inherent worth. Historically, the “use” of this world for salvation in Augustine gradually gives way to its “use” for modern technological appropriation. By late modernity the natural world is no longer “used” as a scaffold toward a transcendent end; rather, it is “used” as materiel in the human pursuit of immanent ends. The humanistic problem pressing upon us is: does this technological history allow us to envision any alternative to “using” the world as material for exploitation, transformation, and consumption? Are there limits to “use”? Where or how does “enjoyment”—taking something for an end in itself—enter into or interrupt this world of limitless “use”? Might radically rethinking “use” and “enjoyment” help us to transform our root attitudes to the natural world and our relationship with it as embodied in technologies?