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To: Dr. Carol Robb, reviewer, and the AAR Program Committee
From: Stephanie Kaza and Daniel Spencer, co-chairs
Religion and Ecology Group
Re: Five-Year Report for Group Renewal

Thank you for considering our request for renewal as a Group. This first five years has given us a chance to explore the territory of our emerging field and create a lively forum for an increasing number of interested scholars. In some ways we have barely scratched the surface of a very big area of inquiry; we look forward to hearing the results of our review and hope you will look favorably on our request so that we can continue the dialogue.

History and Overview

The Religion and Ecology group was initiated in 1991 by Eugene Bianchi and others as an exploratory consultation. The first meeting provided an opportunity to test the waters for interest in this newly emerging field. The response was quite positive and an ad hoc steering committee helped to organize a call for papers the following year. After two years as a consultation, Dr. Bianchi submitted a proposal to change our status to Group. Rationales for this included: 1) strong commitment from scholars engaged in religion and ecology concerns, 2) high attendance and interest at sessions, 3) desire to catalyze critical and constructive thinking in a field rife with subjective exploration, 4) the increasing world-wide call for religious involvement in environmental issues. The status change was granted in 1993 for the five-year period through 1997. A formal steering committee was formed and papers reviewed for the 1993 meeting.

Since that time, the group has met enthusiastically each year, glad for the chance to share new ideas and push the edges of the field. In the last five years, the number of publications in Religion and Ecology have grown logarhythmically, from a very small number of early classics to many individual monographs and sophisticated anthologies. Areas under serious exploration include: environmental ethics, ecophilosophy, world religions and their environmental perspectives/positions, animal rights, ecofeminism, deep ecology, global ethics, ecospirituality, environmental justice. This explosion of interest is not unlike the history of other fields with entirely new intellectual perspectives such as feminist theology, black theology, liberation theology. Religion and Ecology in the early bloom of such scholarly exploration. We have been fortunate to have many leading scholars doing groundbreaking work participate in our sessions every year. In addition, it is

heartening to see graduate student research take up new subjects within the field and bring their work to the AAR meetings.

Purpose:

Since Lynn White's famous critique of western religion and its impact on the environment (in Nature 1967), scholars in religion, philosophy, and environmental studies have been grappling with the ecological dimension of religious ideas, attitudes, and behavior. White felt that the Judeo-Christian traditions defined God as separate from nature, and in so doing, had legitimated a human-center ethics based on domination and control of nature. The religious community was challenged to respond and reevaluate some of its primary messages.

At the time of his article, the environmental movement was gaining tremendous momentum, both as a popular activist movement and as a sea change of national policy-making. The 1970s saw the passage of a number of very significant environmental laws, such as the Endangered Species Act, which permanently altered the ethical landscape in modern America. In the 1980s, under the threat of Reagan economics, environmentalists worked harder than ever to make ecological issues a moral concern. Thrown by the White critique, it took two decades until religious scholars and institutions were ready to make a serious contribution to the ethical debates. Now in the 1990s, as life support systems deteriorate and major disasters become commonplace, these voices are needed more than ever.

The role of the Religion and Ecology group is to foster the scholarly component of this work and help apply new findings to current situations. Already there have been some outstanding contributions from various denominations regarding specific issues such as environmental racism or animal rights. Much of this work has been generated by concerned church and temple leaders. The AAR group, in contrast, serves as a forum for scholars and teachers working with young minds of the next generations. Because the environmental crisis is only likely to get worse, it is critical that meaningful levels of inquiry in this area be part of a young person's education. Scholars are now undertaking the important work of drawing together resources from specific world traditions, interpreting existing ethics for environmental implications, and bringing a religious perspectives to developing environmental philosophies such as deep ecology. We seek specifically to further explore the role of religious thinking in examining environmental issues, and to bring an ecological perspective to other fields in the study of religion such as theology ethics, world religions, and spirituality.

Focus for the Group, 1993-1997

A look at our call for papers over the past five years reveals the wide range of themes suggested by participants and steering committee members. Each year we have suggested 6-8 areas of potential interest, based on what seems to be "hot" as well as challenging. We have looked for areas of emerging scholarship such as ecofeminism, deep ecology, and environmental cosmology. Several panels have worked with a single topic from the perspectives of 4-6 major world religions, developing a comparative conversation about religious resources to address the moral dilemmas of environmental problems. For

example, this worked well in looking at the emerging radical environmental philosophies of ecofeminism and deep ecology. We have also hosted several book reviews with author respondents, using critical analysis to correct inadequacies or suggest alternative interpretations, thereby expanding the initial thesis. The sessions addressing major works by Thomas Berry and Brian Swimme were very enriching and lively. In addition, the steering committees have made efforts to organize paper sessions to highlight difficult areas, such as “the politics of nature” or “the problem of evil”, taking discussions unto uncomfortable territory.

Individual paper sessions have brought a wonderfully wide range of explorations both in topic and methodology (see appendix for full listing). From biotechnology to animal theology, from sacred place to nuclear disaster, from new theologies of God to karma theory, from traditional to postmodern environmental ethics—the caliber and range of scholarly work has been impressive. For all sessions we have structured the timing to emphasize group discussion. Some of the most provocative conversations have taken place during this time, often continuing out into the corridors after the session. Overall we have found this practice to be very rewarding, allowing and encouraging a much greater participation from simply hearing presenters.

In addition, we have been eager to engage other fields of religion to explore eco-theological questions in a range of contexts. For the past four years and also in 1998, we have been able to organize joint sessions with a range of groups to expand this dialogue. These collaborative sessions have been with:

Religion in South Asia – 1994
Native Traditions in the Americas – 1995
Religion, Peace, and War – 1996
Theology and Science—1997
Mysticism – 1998

In each case, the collaborative discussion has been broadened by sharing perspectives across the two fields. (See appendix for listing of papers in joint sessions.)

Methodologies and research approaches have varied widely in the papers presented, and we have sought that mix. Because the field is so new, no single methodology has risen to the top as best or primary. The papers and panels have drawn on:

- 1) anthropological methods and case studies
(such as the panel on ecological resistance and the role of religion)
- 2) theoretical exploration of ethics principles
(such as the panel on the problem of evil)
- 3) applied work
(such as on the Earth Charter)
- 4) religious biographies
(as in the session on nature and science writers)
- 5) text analysis
(as in the session on contemporary nature mysticisms)
- 6) values deconstruction
(such as the panel on ecofeminism and world religions)

For some sessions, the committees have deliberately mixed the range of methods presented in order to shed more light on the theme.

In 1997 we initiated a new program session, the Sacred Sites Bus and Walking Tour. Because the meeting took place in San Francisco, we were able to host people at the world famous redwoods of Muir Woods and also visit Green Gulch Zen Center afterwards. The purpose of the trip was to experience the sacred in a natural setting, and to stimulate interaction among members of the group and others who joined the trip. The tour was so popular that we were turning people away at the bus. We decided to continue the experiment and are again offering a trip to an untrammled area for the 1998 Orlando meeting.

Future Goals

The Religion and Ecology group has suggested a number of areas for further exploration. Some of these have been listed on the Call for Papers but have not yet had sufficient response to form a full session. These topic areas include:

- intersecting dominations (i.e. women, animals, class or racial groups) and the relation to religious ideas, attitudes, and behaviors
- Scientific views of evolution, ecology, and ecosystems and their impacts on religion
- nature, culture, and technology
- greening of the campus and the religious studies curriculum
- nature religions in America
- pagan spirituality and practices
- Earth Charter environmental ethics
- ecoreligious aspects of food and food production
- the rights and values of trees and plants
- moral and spiritual response to the culture of environmental violence
- the toxic legacy of militarism and the role of religion
- religious influences on population and consumption
- spiritual resources in dealing with environmental despair
- moral and theological dimensions of interspecies justice
- the interface of liberation theology and ecology

We have had good success with pre-formed panels and book reviews, using both as fora to draw strong speakers and develop important themes for discussion. So, if papers do not come in on some of these topics, we are often able to raise the issues through planned sessions. We are also interested in collaborating on further joint sessions; some that have been suggested include:

- North American Religions
- Academic Teaching and Study of Religion
- Ethics
- Christian Spirituality

- Indigenous Religious Traditions
- New Religious Movements

As for organizations goals, we have talked about the possibility of producing an annual newsletter highlighting our sessions and drawing attention to new books in the field. We have passed around a mailing list sign-up several times and could have a good mailing list, if someone were willing to take on this responsibility. This would encourage more members to participate and introduce the section to new AAR members.

The steering committee has been very strong each year, with top leaders in the field joining as members. For the next five years, as members change over, we will need to cultivate leadership in new committee members and keep strong relations with past committee members. We have been successful in rotating the co-chair responsibilities from one year to the next, with one chair carrying over from one year to the next. This has stabilized procedures and made for smooth transitions.

Rationale for Renewal

The Religion and Ecology group has been extremely successful thus far in its short history. Sessions have been well attended, with numbers increasing from year to year. (See appendix for figures). The various topics have generated stimulating and lively discussion in virtually every session (we choose them to load the odds for this). We have been able to develop joint sessions with a wide range of interest groups within the Academy. The leadership of the steering committee has been stable and reliable every year. Given the blind review process, we have made a strong effort to have broad representation among participants (see self-evaluation in appendix). Because our field is so new, we have drawn graduate students as well as respected senior scholars; people from the United States as well as Australia, England, Japan, and India; and people from diverse class, race, gender, and geographical backgrounds. Because we are all fundamentally concerned with the threatened state of the planet, the group members come together with common motivation and genuine desire for challenging discussion. Many members find this the most stimulating professional forum they have found for engaging these questions of deep meaning for them.

We are eager to receive constructive criticism, but it seems to us we have more than met the criteria for success in the AAR. We believe Religion and Ecology has a significant role to play in the wider academy, raising issues that cut across many fields of study. It is clear to us that religions play a tremendously powerful role in establishing and maintaining social values regarding the environment. With continued in-depth scrutiny of this process and its cultural and environmental impacts, scholars of religion and ecology can make a significant contribution to the current ecological conversation. Though much of what is so beloved will be lost, we can still offer our best efforts on behalf of what can be saved.

Thank you.