



Review of the AAR Religion and Ecology Group

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Summary

Beginning as a Consultation in 1991 and achieving Group status in 1993, the Religion and Ecology meetings and organization have continued to grow and mature to the point where today they rival that of a very good Section. The goal of the Religion and Ecology Group is to explore “the interdisciplinary interface between issues of ecological concern and the world’s religious traditions using a variety of approaches including theologians, anthropologists, historians of religions, ethicists, scientists and others.” Evidence in the annual reports and five year self-study, along with observations from attendance at the 2004 program sessions, joint session, business meeting, and meeting with the steering committee, have convinced this reviewer that the Group should be given Section status. The Group has identified a major challenge to contemporary life on this planet and engaged the knowledge of science with the wisdom of the religions so as to provide key answers to new questions facing all humans. Over the past decade, the ecology question has continued to become more important for current and future life. The activity of this Group has fostered increased awareness of these issues, the provision of research and teaching materials, and the development of undergraduate and graduate courses – all from a cross-cultural and interdisciplinary perspective. Attendance at their

sessions continues to be very strong (e.g., this year's numbers at their two sessions were 54 and 89 with 40 attending the business meeting), and the papers presented were intellectually rigorous, engaging excellent discussion and analysis. The presenters included a cross-section of ages from graduate students to senior scholars (e.g., Bron Taylor and John Cobb). The presenters represented a good gender balance, a diversity of cultures and included persons of colour. In addition to its intellectual strength, this Group is impressive for its openness, its sense of community, its supportiveness to all attendees (especially young scholars and graduate students) and the efficiency of its organization (which is carefully continued by the mentoring of new steering committee members and chairs). Its importance to and impact upon the wider academy is seen in the fact that each year the Group receives several requests for program session co-sponsorship – this year from “Ethics,” “Social Sciences,” “Critical Theory,” and “Religious Freedom, Public Life and the State,” with the latter Group being selected and having a very lively session on the “environmental card” in the 2004 election (with some 53 persons in attendance with a very engaged discussion).

Program

Over the past five years, the Group's programs have included a variety of perspectives and disciplines. Environmental justice has often been the organizing theme and has been examined from the perspectives of the Eastern and Western religions. Newly published key books or series have been focused upon. The interface between literature, religion and ecology has been examined, as in the writings of Terry Tempest Williams and Barbara Kingslover. This year there was a strong focus on “Religion and Ecology in Latin America,” with scholarly and feminist activist participation from Brazil.

In a session on “Meta-Ecological Worlds,” the papers presented literary, ethical and historical-philosophical critical analysis of religion and ecology. One criticism of this year’s program was that too much time was given to the reading of papers, leaving too little for the high quality discussion that was generated. My meeting with the steering committee showed that they are aware of this problem and have some good ideas for the future to deal with it. For example, the Group proposed using Tuesday morning sessions to share creative teaching ideas. This might happen via workshops, where experienced professors invite participants to bring along ideas and syllabi for a working session, or through poster presentations, or possibly even via the use of film and video and other new technologies now available for teaching Religion and Ecology. Additional ideas that surfaced included posting papers on creative classroom exercises on the Religion and Ecology website, to be read ahead of time and then discussed / enacted at the session.

As mentioned above, the joint-session with the “Public Life” group was most successful, with some 53 in attendance from both groups. The program activity of the Religion and Ecology Group is most effectively achieving its goal as stated above.

Audience

Attendance at sessions of the Religion and Ecology Group has been consistently high over the years (in the 50 to 100 plus range). There is a committed and large core group of senior and junior scholars as well as graduate students (carefully nourished by the group), plus a considerable sprinkling of wider AAR members in attendance at the sessions. The audience and presenters offer a good cross-section of the age, gender, and racial diversity of the AAR. An unusual and welcome factor is the attendance of senior scholars at all of the sessions, even when not presenting, and the care they devote to the

nurture of junior scholars and graduate students, through both formal discussion and informal interaction before and after sessions.

Place in the AAR

The Religion and Ecology Group has brought to the fore for Religious Studies a major area of contemporary concern and “mined” the resources of the religions for wisdom on this issue. That Ecology and the Environment is a concern of pressing and increasing importance can be seen from political structures (e.g., EPA), NGOs (e.g., Sierra Club), and even consumer marketing (e.g., the new Prius car) devoted to it. The Religion and Ecology Group has ensured that Religion has engaged and responded to this issue in ways that build bridges with other disciplines (e.g., Science, Political Science) and with the general public. Within the wider AAR, the impact of the Group’s activity is seen in the “spinning off” of newly emerging areas of scholarship such as animal rights, environmental cosmology and the Earth Charter. Senior members of the Group have given leadership to such important enterprises as the Harvard University Religion and Ecology Series and the important new *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* (edited by Bron Taylor, published by *Continuum*, and featuring scholarship nourished by the Group). All of this scholarly activity has not yet peaked. This is an area of research and teaching that offers major opportunities to the AAR (for nurture and engagement) in the future.

Paper Submission and Selection Process

As can be seen from the Annual Reports, the number of paper submissions remains high (ranging from 25-62, with half or less being accepted in any given year). Reviewing is “blind” with all of the steering committee participating. In my experience,

the academic rigor and fairness of this Group's selection process is a model others could emulate. A major problem of the Group is that they receive many high quality proposals for panels, papers and joint sessions that they cannot take up because of the limitations of Group status. In the view of this reviewer, moving them to Section status would help to relieve this significant problem and allow their academic potential to "flower." The wonderfully dynamic and creative business meeting I attended (of some 40 senior and junior scholars plus many graduate students) lasted for a full hour and was filled with lively, intellectual engagement producing far more fine program ideas than they will be able to use.

Leadership and Organization

The Self-Study and Annual Reports give a clear picture of a well organized and effectively run group which gives good attention to its future stability and growth. This impression was fully verified in my attendance at the Business Meeting and my one-hour meeting with the Steering Committee (past and present members). What is said on paper really is what happens on the ground. There is good continuity and depth in leadership, with Group co-chairs regularly chosen from experienced steering committee participants. A significant group of persons have worked with the Group over a decade or more (e.g., Mary Evelyn Tucker). There is a fine group loyalty and commitment exhibited and a dedication to the nurturing of young scholars and graduate students. The approach of the senior scholars and the steering committee is very democratic and sensitive to inclusive participation (gender, race, culture and age) from both "old-timers" and new members. All of this positions the Group well to become a successful Section.

The Future

The evidence of the Annual Reports, the Self-Study document and my attendance at the 2004 sessions and business meeting (and meeting with the steering committee) convince me that the Religion and Ecology Group is effectively meeting the “Guidelines for Review” Criteria 4 (a-g). I am particularly struck by the inclusiveness of the Group and by the long-term commitment of its participants (from senior scholars who are leaders in the field to graduate students with thesis research in the area). This is clearly a stream of vital and important scholarship that is on the rise. The programs of the Group appeal widely to scholars outside of the unit including those from the various religions sections as well as disciplinary areas such as ethics and women’s studies. The publications engendered (e.g., *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature* and the *Harvard Series*) are testimony to the intellectual caliber of the Group’s life and work. All of this convinces me that Religion and Ecology has become a strong intellectual area within the academic study of religion. It has outgrown what it can do as a Group and needs to move to Section status for its future promise to be realized.