

Faith & Climate Change

*A guide to talking
with the five major faiths*



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About Climate Outreach

[Climate Outreach](#) (formerly COIN) is a charity focused on building cross-societal acceptance of the need to tackle climate change. We have over 10 years of experience helping our partners to talk and think about climate change in ways that reflect their individual values, interests and ways of seeing the world. We work with a wide range of partners including central, regional and local governments, charities, business, faith organisations and youth groups.

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Acknowledgements

Many thanks to the [OurVoices](#) campaign team for help in coordinating aspects of the research, in particular:

- **Reverend Fletcher Harper** (Executive Director, GreenFaith)
- **Alex Price** (Digital Engagement Manager, GreenFaith)

Also, many thanks to the faith leaders and experts who agreed to be interviewed as part of this research, especially the members of the OurVoices network who organised recruitment and logistics for the narrative workshops and assisted in reviewing drafts of this report:

- **Dr Husna Ahmed OBE** (Muslim recruitment)
- **Gopal Patel & Sheila Chauhan** (Hindu recruitment)
- **Canon Giles Goddard** (Christian recruitment)
- **Rabbi Jonathan Wittenberg** (Jewish recruitment)
- **Venerable Bhante Seelawimala** (Buddhist recruitment)
- **Nana Firman & Saffet Catovic** (Muslim support)
- **Robert Kolodny & Kristin Barker** (Buddhist support)

Cite as: Marshall, G., Corner, A., Roberts, O. and Clarke, J. (2016). Faith & Climate Change - A guide to talking with the five major faiths. Oxford: Climate Outreach.

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FEBRUARY 2016

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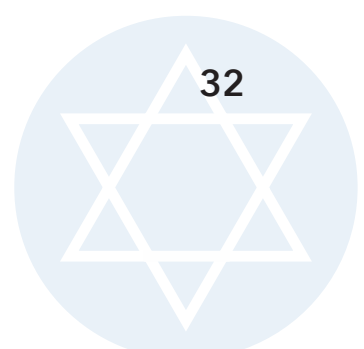
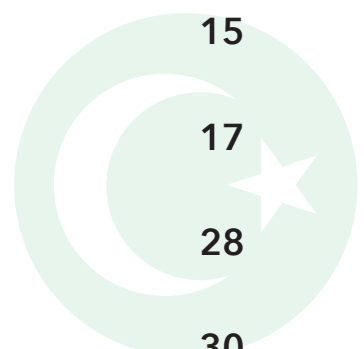
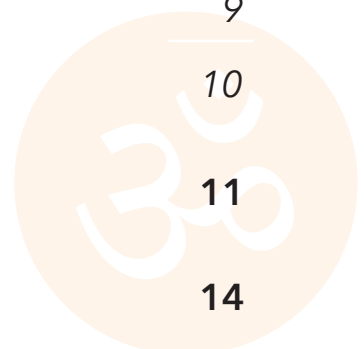
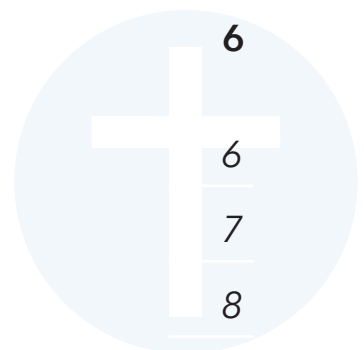
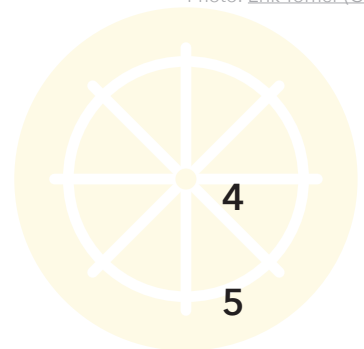
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Introduction

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This guide is intended to provide **practical guidance for climate communicators, both inside and outside faith communities**, about what language works well and – crucially – what language might pose an obstacle for communicating with any specific faith group.

In April 2015, GreenFaith asked Climate Outreach to develop and test language around climate change that could mobilise activity across **five main faith groups (in alphabetical order: Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism)** in the run-up to the 2015 world climate conference in Paris.

This research may be the first of its kind: **not only does it seek language that works with each of the faiths, it seeks language that works across all of them.**

We started by consulting a team of faith experts about the messages they found had been most effective in their work. We also drew on a wide range of research, educational materials and faith-based climate change statements. From this initial research we constructed trial narratives in the form of a speech or sermon. These are given in Appendix II.

We then held **narrative workshops within each of the five faith groups** following a testing methodology refined by Climate Outreach.¹ The workshops discussed values, identity and attitudes to climate change, and then appraised the trial narratives. Additional comments were provided via an online survey with over 650 individuals from all five faiths and 53 countries. Full details of methodology are given in Appendix I.

The report begins by exploring language that can work across all faiths, and continues by looking at each faith individually.

We must stress that **this is a guide and not a rule book**. It is indicative, not definitive. We made every effort to balance workshops by age and gender, and to recruit a diverse range of backgrounds and ethnicities for the workshops. The research was extensive (20 hours of recording, over 100 pages of transcripts and nearly 1000 survey comments) but has limitations. It was not able to explore the differences in attitudes within faiths or between countries, or differentiate by political views – even though political worldviews are known to be an important influence on attitudes to climate change.

Nonetheless, we believe this to be a pioneering piece of research which we intend to build on and explore further. We very much welcome feedback and enquiries from anyone interested in working with us on this project.

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Finding Climate Narratives That Work

Photo: [Simon Webster](#) (CC)

Fundamental principles

Extensive research has established **fundamental principles for effective climate communication that can be applied to any well-defined audience**. The context needs to reflect people's identity and respect and validate their values. The language need to be familiar to them and, ideally, include words they use themselves to describe their values. The actions proposed need to reinforce rather than threaten people's values and identity.²

Values and identity are transmitted and shared in the form of socially constructed narratives. Cognitive psychology has found that these narratives are the primary means by which people make sense of the world and give shape to their lives.³ There is a growing body of evidence that **social narratives are often far more important in leading people to accept or reject climate change than the underlying scientific evidence**.⁴

Narrative arcs

Narratives have universal rules, and a compelling narrative arc can be found throughout the entire history of storytelling. It focuses on a 'struggle' to defend an identity or set of values. The resolution of this struggle brings an opening of new possibilities that further re-affirms those values.⁵ This narrative is present in everything from traditional myths to modern movies – and throughout the sacred texts of all faiths.⁶

For each of the following 5 narratives, we propose a **narrative arc** (or parts of an arc).

Narrative Arc

1. **Validation** - what you care for
2. **Challenge** - how what you care for is threatened
3. **Action** - how change can reflect your values
4. **Restoration** - a return to your values and reinforcement of the world you wish to see



Five Narratives That Work Across Faiths

Photo: Ed Suominen (CC)

Earth care, a precious gift

*The divine is all around us in all living things
and in the abundance of the natural world.*

*The natural world is a precious gift and
caring for it is an act of worship.*

*We have a sacred responsibility to care
for the Earth and be its stewards.*

Narrative Arc

1. We have been entrusted with the care of the Earth.
2. Climate change is harming the Earth.
3. We need to return to our appropriate relationship to it.
4. By doing so we fulfill our responsibility and restore harmony.

Keywords: gift, Creation, nature, living things, respect, responsibility, care, nurture, flourish, productivity

For all faiths, caring for the natural world is a principle strongly embedded in texts and observance.

Faith can be seen as a means of interpreting climate change:

"Religion provides an amazing tool to talk about our deepest feelings in our relationship to nature." (Jewish workshop participant)

The principle of the world being a gift that we have a responsibility to respect appears spontaneously in people's language across faiths:

"We should look after the world as something borrowed, given to us as a gift... so we should handle it in a very similar way." (Hindu workshop participant)

However... be careful with language

Different faiths have very different ways of describing their relationship to the natural world so while the principle works across faiths, it is hard to find engaging language that can speak across all faiths, other than 'gift'.

Language about divine 'Creation' and the 'productivity' of the Earth works well with Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity and Islam). For Hindus and Buddhists, however, the concept of 'Creation' or of a divine Creator is not at all central. For these traditions, language around the 'natural world' builds more effectively on their strong ethical responsibility for caring for all living things. However, referring to the 'natural world' is, in many cases, too weak for Christians and Muslims.

"Language that speaks only of the 'natural world', with no indication that it might be God's creation, is unlikely to excite and energise those from my tradition." (Christian survey responder)

Climate change is a moral challenge

We have a moral obligation not to harm others, to be just and fair, to care for the poor and vulnerable, provide for our children and respect future generations.

Climate change is a moral challenge.

It is harming the poor and vulnerable. We should be generous and care for them. It is our responsibility to preserve the legacy of our parents and provide for the future for our children.

Narrative Arc

1. We have a moral obligation not to harm others, to be fair, to care for the poor and vulnerable, provide for our children and respect our parents.
2. Climate change can hurt the most vulnerable now and in the future.
3. When we take action we uphold those moral values.
4. The world becomes fairer, the vulnerable are better cared for and we fulfill our duty to those who came before and will come after us.

Keywords: moral, care, love, harm, vulnerability, poor, born, unborn, ancestors

All faiths contain sacred values condemning violence and harm to others (particularly for Hindus and Buddhists, this extends to all living things), being charitable, and protecting the vulnerable. Future generations are important to all faith groups. Climate change is a developing issue with no clear beginning or end, so this narrative places it within the intergenerational timeline of respect for both those who came before us and those yet unborn.

However... be careful with language

Be careful using the word 'justice'. Justice is a complex concept with multiple meanings which will not work with all audiences. The word 'justice' has strong Abrahamic overtones and performed poorly with Hindu and Buddhist participants. Also, when applied to 'social justice' for the poor, it has a left-wing resonance that may work poorly with people of conservative politics.

Avoid 'psychological distancing'. People often sub-consciously seek to disengage from the issue by viewing it as an issue affecting other people in other places.⁷ Language about harm to the vulnerable or future generations could create a false separation between 'us' and the future 'victims' of climate change. So use the present tense (it is harming) rather than the future (it will harm). Language about impacts on other groups in other parts of the world, however sincere, can also enable people to distance it, so stress that climate change is already affecting everyone in our own communities and countries.

Avoid arguments that inaction is wrong/evil. People of faith appear to regard inaction on climate change as ignorant or weak but not expressly sinful. Although they accepted the moral narrative that action is the right thing to do, most workshop participants also rejected the opposite language: that inaction on climate change is wrong or distances us from God.

Climate change is disrupting the natural balance

There is a divine balance to the world. Climate change is disrupting that balance.

The seasons are coming at the wrong times. Flowers are blooming too early or too late. The rivers are flooding and then running dry.

Climate change is a message that something is wrong.

By taking action on climate change we can restore that natural order and balance.

Narrative Arc

1. We respect and sustain the natural order and global and universal systems.
2. Climate change is tipping the natural order off balance, leading to instability and chaos.
3. When we take action we respect that balance.
4. The world returns to its natural order and stability is restored.

Keywords: balance, stability, order, instability, disorder, chaos

All faiths, especially in their more traditional or conservative expressions, are concerned with order, authority and stability. These are presented in opposition to disorder and instability. This narrative works especially well with the Hindu and Buddhist understanding of a universal order, and also reflects important Islamic teachings regarding Allah's generous provision of a world in balance. It also lends itself well to visual representation and a positive narrative of restoration. Existing climate change language often uses metaphors of balance, tipping points and a climate running out of control that can be combined with this narrative.

This narrative builds on a widespread concern about instable weather, including from people who do not yet accept the role of human activity in causing those changes. Workshop participants talked spontaneously about the weather being out of balance and the seasons not arriving at the right time, as well as an increased frequency of extreme and freak weather.

However... be careful with language

Be careful around causality. Faith groups have different attitudes to the role of God or a single Creator in creating this balance. They also have mixed views on the power of humans to tip this balance or restore it. This also applies within faiths and reflects different beliefs around divine and human influence.

Do not overstress disaster. Wider research suggests that apocalyptic messaging or images should be used with caution and only if balanced with positive messaging about personal empowerment, solutions and restoration.

We live our faith through our actions

Our faith is our whole way of life. We express it through everything we say and do.

Through our actions we can lead through example, inspire others and be teachers to the rest of the world.

But we should not be arrogant, ignorant, greedy and wasteful.

We need action at all levels – government, business, nations and community – and in our personal lives.

We should live simply and respect our community and the natural world.

As a duty we will live by our principles, gladly living a simple, contented and fulfilled life.

Narrative Arc

1. We should not be greedy or wasteful.
2. Through our destructive and ignorant behaviour, we have harmed the earth and broken our relationship with Creation.
3. We express our faith through our actions.
4. When we live more simply, in a way that does not impact on the climate, our actions are more in harmony with our faith. We will become better as individuals and the whole world will come to reflect our values.

Keywords: actions, harmony, honesty, clarity, consumption, greed, waste, arrogance

People of all faiths proclaim the centrality of their faith in their lives:

"If there is no faith there is no us. Without it we are just existing." (Muslim workshop participant)

"It gives me self-confidence. It is a central part of my life." (Hindu workshop participant)

All the world religions have injunctions against waste, excessive consumption and taking an unfair share of common resources (though not all extol poverty). Hindus responded very positively to this language, with one participant quoting Krishna as saying:

"Take only what you need. Do not take anything more because you do not know to whom it belongs." (Hindu workshop participant)

All faiths welcomed calls to live more simply as well as language condemning arrogance, greed and waste.

Seek language around personal commitment. The language of personal action performed far better in the workshops and survey when it was incorporated into a personal pledge (see next page).

However... be careful with language

Avoid blame. Like the general population, people of faith are often unwilling to accept blame for climate change and unsure how useful their own action might be for such a large-scale, collective problem. For this reason, all groups strongly preferred language that placed personal action within a wider frame of reciprocal action across all society combining personal, collective and governmental action.

I take a personal pledge

*This is why climate change is important to me
and my personal faith.*

*I accept climate change as a truth and
will share it.*

*I commit myself to make a decisive step
to change myself, live more simply
and protect the world.*

*I will gladly live a simple, contented and
fulfilled life, as a duty.*

Narrative Arc

1. I reaffirm my faith, to share, lead and teach through the power of my personal belief.
2. I recognise that I have a responsibility for the harm I may have caused.
3. Through my personal action I will right this wrong.
4. By so doing, I help to inspire others and build a world in which others share my values.

Almost all climate communications, including faith climate statements, use the 'we' pronoun; for example 'we need to take action'. This language seeks to be engaging but can also suggest collective blame and lead people to distance themselves from the issue.

All faiths contain rituals of personal declaration and commitment expressed in the 'I'. In Buddhism this is repeated in daily practice: "I undertake the principle of...". Such personal declarations are more engaging and reflect different traditions of inspiration and teaching.

In our research, we tested language around climate change as a truth and suggestions to live more simply in both 'we' and 'I' forms, and found that they performed far better when presented in the 'I' form. Faith communications may therefore be more effective in the form of personal statements of belief and action than in the collective 'we' form.



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Three Potential Concepts



Photo: Alain (CC)

The following concepts were well received by all the faith groups, although there was some disagreement about the specific words that should be used. They are therefore not recommended as complete narratives and best seen as effective concepts that will need to be carefully tuned to the traditions of each group.

Wake up!

*In our faith we strive for awareness and acceptance of reality.
When we are not aware of climate change it is as though we are asleep.
We should wake up! This way we can spread awareness through the wider world.*

Keywords: awareness, awakening, ignorance, avoidance, sleep

The quest for greater awareness is found in all faiths. The metaphor of sleeping and waking is widely found in parables and teachings and provides a strong bridge between the Abrahamic faiths, Buddhism and Hinduism.

"Climate change is like something in the back of your mind – you can feel it but you don't actually discuss the causes of it... It needs a wake-up call." (Hindu workshop participant)

In the workshops, this language was more appealing and less divisive than stronger language around blame or deliberate ignorance because it does not judge or alienate those who are not yet 'awake' and contains a positive call to action that invites them to participate. However, people rejected the idea that we were pretending to be asleep and this should not be used.



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Reject dirty fuels and move to clean energy

In our faith we aspire to divine/spiritual purity.

The world/Creation is being polluted and desecrated by dirty fossil fuels.

Dirty energy is corrupting the purity of the natural world, hurting the innocent.

We need to start anew with clean energy sources.

Keywords: clean, pure, starting anew, dirty, pollution, corrupting, despoiling

Research shows that people associate values of purity with the natural environment,⁸ other living things and children. Climate communications has already explored this dichotomy by referring to 'dirty' carbon and 'clean', renewable energy solutions.

All faiths include this dichotomy. They present the divine in terms of purity, and express the profane in terms of dirt and pollution. All faiths contain language and ritual concerned with cleansing.

The metaphor works well when it is used lightly (dirty fuels/pollution, clean energy). Participants had mixed views when it was applied more strongly to purifying the Earth. For example, the phrase "through action we can cleanse ourselves and the world" was liked by some traditionalists but criticised by some liberal participants as sounding "too biblical".



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Taking action brings us closer to God

*Climate change is taking us all away from the divine system, will or plan.
Through action on climate change we can become closer to God, deeper in our faith,
more complete and become better people individually and collectively.
And by being closer to God we are better able to take action on climate change.*

Keywords: a calling, clarity, consistency, completeness, whole

This concept frames climate change as an issue that can strengthen both personal and collective faith. This narrative overlaps with the 'balance' narrative in suggesting that action can restore a rightful balance.

There are two complementary and effective approaches. The primary motivation for action on climate change is to become a better person and stronger in your faith:

"Through taking action on climate change, people could rediscover their Muslim faith."
(Muslim workshop participant)

The specific details of how this might look are best left to the traditions of each faith. This narrative could explore people's wider concerns about their personal faith and weakening belief in their community.

Although action on climate change can be presented as strengthening faith, negative language suggesting that inaction on climate change distances us from God scored poorly. Some faiths, including Muslims and Christians, strongly endorsed the idea that action on climate change was a means for their faith to 'rediscover and renew itself'. However, this language did not work well with Hindus or Buddhists. The best framing therefore is in terms of personal renewal rather than collective renewal.



Photo: Wazari Wazir (CC)



Photo: Reena Mahtani (CC)



Language That Did NOT Work Across Faiths

Photo: NPS Climate Change Response (CC)

The following language was **rejected by some participants** in the research. This does not mean that it is bad language – in fact, it may score highly with some audiences – but it clearly does not work across all faiths.

Justice	Although common in statements on climate change, the word justice has strong Abrahamic overtones. It can also have a left-wing interpretation that scores poorly with many conservatives. A safer word is fairness.
Blame	Most people regard climate change as a matter of failure rather than blame. Even though most participants accepted criticisms of greed and consumption, they were less sure that it could be justifiably applied to climate change.
Punishment	Many people rejected messages based on blame and punishment, stating that “we will be called to account.” This reaction supports wider research concluding that climate change narratives based on blame and fear rarely succeed ⁹ and may be especially alienating to social conservatives. ¹⁰
Disobedience	This word is very polarising. Some thought it entirely appropriate, others rejected it. Because carbon pollution is outside the specific proscriptions of any of the core faith texts, many felt that it could not be seen as a specific act of religious disobedience. They argued that people are causing harm through ignorance and therefore required a loving supportive approach rather than judgment.
Natural limits	Environmentalism often talks about living within the Earth's limits. However, this language scored poorly with faiths that see no limit to divine provision – especially Muslims. It is better to talk about the need to limit human desires for moral reasons.
Signs and Tests	Although most of the faiths have language concerning signs and tests, none like it applied to climate change. Preferred language, which works with all faiths, is to present climate change as a warning (see next page).
Proselytising	Most faiths do not actively seek new converts. Language about building movements needs to be about expanding networks within their faith, not recruiting new members.
Religion	People of faith do not like the word religion which sounds, in their words, hierarchical, power-based, academic and distant from their personal beliefs and way of life. It should always be replaced with faith.
Forgiveness	The language of forgiveness – either asking forgiveness from God or extending forgiveness to the perpetrators of climate change – may work for some (though not all) Christians and Jews. However, it had little appeal with other faiths groups, especially given the uncertainty about responsibility and blame.
Civilisation and Prosperity	None of the groups showed any interest in the language about prosperity and civilisation. However, none actively rejected it either and this could be important language for speaking to more conservative or aspirational groups.



Other Emerging Ideas

Photo: [Michael Matti](#) (CC)

Although **not tested**, the following ideas emerged in discussions and contributions to the survey.

Global warning

The language of signs and tests did not work well in narrative workshops. People far preferred calling climate change a warning:

| *"Is Allah punishing us? No! He is warning us."* (Muslim workshop participant)

Journey

Like faith, our engagement with climate change is a journey from ignorance to knowledge, from struggle to discovery. The language of paths, journeys, and (sometimes) steps appears across all faith traditions and appeared regularly in discussions. Journeys are especially powerful for Buddhists:

| *"The transformation of the human mind is the central project of the Buddhist path."*
(Buddhist survey respondent)

The morality of inaction

All faiths contain criticisms of a failure to respond to a moral challenge. This morality of inaction is particularly strong with Jews and Buddhists. Although we were unable to develop language around this within the limited time of this project, it is worth further exploration because the primary cause of climate change comes from continuing on a destructive course rather than any deliberate desire to harm.

Connectedness

Connectedness emerged as a major narrative for all faiths, especially Hindus and Buddhists. Three main themes emerged:

Connectedness between humans, the natural world and the divine

The first Islamic principle, Tawheed, says that all humanity and Creation is an indivisible unity with the Oneness of Allah. Participants in the Jewish workshop spoke repeatedly about connectedness with their faith, with the environment (*"all life is interconnected and the whole"*), with communities and with their ancestry.

Climate change is therefore a symptom of a wider disconnect:

"We have lost our place in the world as human beings." (Jewish workshop participant)

"is a threat in two dimensions: horizontally to vulnerable people around the world, and vertically to future generations." (Buddhist workshop participant)

Action on climate change restores that essential connection with place and our rightful relationship to the Earth and God. As one Christian leader we interviewed put it:

"We can be partners with God in the change."

This is also the guiding spirit of the 2015 Papal Encyclical in which Pope Francis states:

"I would like to enter into dialogue with all people about our common home... since the environmental challenge we are undergoing concerns and affects us all."¹¹

Connectedness with one's religious community

Climate change could strengthen one's personal connection with one's faith (see 'Taking action brings us closer to God' narrative on page 13) and one's wider faith community.

Connection between all people of faith

Climate change may be a means to explore commonalities between faiths and find common ground across historical sectarian divisions:

"We're all striving after the same things in our lives. Our differences are only because of culture and history." (Christian workshop participant)

Need for scientific education and explanation

Many participants did not understand the causes or seriousness of climate change. There was confusion between climate change and ozone depletion, and participants in the Christian, Muslim, and Buddhist workshops all associated Earthquakes and tsunamis with climate change. Presumably this is because they are all potent signs of disturbance:

"When you damage the Earth, Allah will turn the world upside-down." (Muslim workshop participant)

People also tended to bracket climate change as an 'environmental' issue and moved rapidly in their conversations to peripheral or unrelated issues such as littering, recycling, landfill sites, vitamin D deficiency, chemical factories and birth defects.

Communicators should not overestimate people's understanding of the science of climate change and still need to maintain basic education about the causes and impacts.

Faith by Faith: What Works & What Does Not Work

Photo: Michael Bolognesi (CC)

In this section, we present the analysis of our research for each specific faith, listed in alphabetical order. The following analysis is drawn from the following main sources, with these abbreviations:

- **Interviews** with faith leaders (I)
- Discussions in the narrative **workshops** (W)
- Comments entered in an online **survey** (S)
- Quotes from faith **declarations on climate change*** (D)



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* produced by each faith in the months preceding the December 2015 Paris intergovernmental climate negotiations



Buddhism



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The strongest narratives

Of all the main faiths, Buddhism has the greatest variation. It spread throughout South East Asia and developed in different countries in relative isolation. As one participant commented: *"The only thing to do is to keep coming back to the Buddha and his principles and apply them to the modern world."* (W). Some Buddhists find it difficult to apply these ancient teachings to very new problems such as climate change.

The following narratives include text from the Buddhist Climate Change Statement to World Leaders (D)¹² which was signed by 26 Buddhist leaders including the Dalai Lama and presented at the 2015 Paris climate conference.¹³

Balance - interconnectedness

The key Buddhist narrative is a combination of balance and the distinctly Buddhist understanding of interconnection *"founded on the Buddha's realisation of dependent co-arising, which interconnects all things in the universe."* (D)

Buddhists argue that the universe is ruled by natural laws that have consequences in a predictable way. The world has become unbalanced because we have failed to understand our interconnectedness with the Earth. *"Our lives are inextricably interwoven with the natural world through every breath we take, the water we drink, and the food we eat. When the Earth becomes sick, we become sick, because we are part of her."* (D). The reward for action, and the completion of the narrative arc, is that through action on climate change, *"we can develop our full (including spiritual) potential in harmony with the Earth."* (D)

Action

Buddhism is not a prescriptive faith; it's a way of life that is practised through being and doing rather than through ritual. As one participant said, *"Buddhism does not say 'do this, do that', it says 'be aware, be compassionate and act appropriately.'" (W). The core concept is dana which can be translated as 'generosity'. Action on climate change can therefore be portrayed as a generous donation rather than a sacrifice.*

For Buddhists, action can also be expressed through changing internal values: *"the threats and disasters we face ultimately stem from the human mind, and therefore require profound changes within our minds."* (D). Participants in the workshop strongly endorsed language around simple living because *"the key to happiness is contentment rather than an ever increasing abundance of goods."* (D). The narrative arc concludes that, as one participant said, *"the transformation of the human mind can lead to the transformation of the world."* (W)

Earth care - moral challenge

In Buddhism there is no concept of a Creator God and the notion of stewardship does not apply (see comments below). The strong environmental principles within Buddhism are based around the moral principle of respect for all living things and so the 'Earth care, a precious gift' narrative with the 'Climate change is a moral challenge' narrative. *"Justice and rights extend to all living things. We should be compassionate to all beings - beings born and yet to be born."* (W)

Other successful language

Wake up!

Because of the centrality of awareness and awakening in Buddhist theology and practice, metaphors of sleep and wakefulness work well. For Buddhists, ignorance is often described as a form of sleep, slothfulness, or inattention. Buddhists are therefore very receptive to the argument that the lack of action on climate change derives from a collective silence or lack of awareness.

Journey

Buddhism contains many journey metaphors especially language around paths. For Buddhists this also includes inner journeys of discovery and awareness.

What does not work

God, Creation and Creator

All Buddhist participants questioned language and narratives about God, Creator and Creation: *"These are still very much skewed to Abrahamic traditions"* (S). *"The term 'Creation' sounds very Christian to me."* (S). Others commented that the language about 'defending' Creation made it something separate whereas they sought unity and connectedness.

Workshop participants suggested using language around *"Our home, the Earth, all living beings and systems"* instead of Creation. Others wished to see a focus on morality rather than God: *"It is a human responsibility for those who rely on the Earth for life. Thus for our very own survival, we must be socially engaged and concerned about climate change."* (S)

Judgment

There is no language in Buddhism of judgment, testing or punishment. In Buddhism it is not a God who judges you. There is however a core belief that actions have consequences for you and the world around you. *"Everything happens for a reason."* *"Every action has a reaction."* (W)

Distracting Buddhists from a spiritual path

Buddhists speak of two truths: relative (matter-of-fact, this world, temporal) and absolute (spiritual, eternal, where all is one). Climate change is a relative truth. A comment on the survey summarised the views of many: *"Some Western Buddhists are not inclined to take stronger action on climate change because they feel it would pull them away from the core practices and processes that allow themselves and others to grow spiritually. To reach more Buddhists, maybe argue that they don't need to compromise their devotion to the Buddhist path to take action. It's compassion in action."* (S)



Christianity



Photo: Jeffrey Bruno/Aleteia (CC)

The strongest narratives

Different Christian denominations require substantially different narratives. For example, the phrase 'we are in awe of God's creation' resonates with evangelicals but not with Anglicans who prefer to talk about the 'power of love'. Similarly, evangelicals require a higher level of focus on scripture than other denominations. In the research, Catholics were more critical of judgmental language than other denominations.

Climate change is a moral challenge

Christian morality, following the teachings of Christ, is strongly invested in love and protection of the vulnerable and innocent: *"Caring for our neighbours is more powerful than caring for Creation."* (W). For more liberal-minded Christians, this is strongly associated with an ethos of social justice: *"Jesus spoke of caring for the poor and needy. We should share the resources of the Earth fairly rather than oppress, exploit and pollute."* (W)

Creation care - a precious gift

For Christians, 'Creation' is a far more powerful frame than 'Earth' or 'natural world'. Creation is a direct expression of the divine and a gift to us. In the Catholic Encyclical, Pope Francis says *"The Earth was here before us and it has been given to us."* In the workshop, a participant said *"Creation is shaped in God's image as a gift to us. Our damage to Creation is therefore a hurt to God himself."* (W)

Messaging should talk about Creation as a source of abundance: *"As with parables of the sower, we support that abundance rather than undermining it."* (I). A narrative arc for Christians is therefore that, through our action, we protect Creation (the verb 'protect' is preferred to 'defend') and enable Creation to 'flourish'.

We live our faith through our actions

Christians strongly approved of language about action being an expression of their faith. Christian participants preferred the positive language that taking action brings us closer to God over the negative language that climate change holds us back.

Although the injunction to live simply was well received, some Christians were unsure that we have the power or the right to resist climate change: *"Climate change is God's plan and no one can interrupt that... we have to pray for God to give us relief and forgive our mistakes."* (S)

Other successful language

Vision and transformation

Christianity uses the language of transformation: the world can be transformed by faith, and individually we can be transformed through repentance and forgiveness. This transformation can occur at a single moment through revelation and epiphany. There is also a strong visionary tradition within Christianity aiming to create 'God's Kingdom on Earth'. Climate messaging for Christians can focus on the transformational aspects of faith, for example, generating moments of commitment and personal transformation.

Church communicators

Of all the faiths, Christianity has the strongest and most influential hierarchies, especially in Catholicism, so there are opportunities for reaching people through their church hierarchy. Nonetheless, one of the Christian leaders we interviewed warned that *"In polls, 60% of people are most likely to be impressed by friends and colleagues"*, and that, even among Evangelicals, *"there is no sense that any single preacher would be sufficient to change their views."* (I)

What does not work

Blame

Participants consistently said that it is better to focus on redemption and moving forward rather than blame and sin. They accepted the need for sacrifice, but said this needed to be presented as a moral requirement and a duty to God. Language around 'disobedience' does not work for many Christians.

Forgiveness

Although the language around forgiveness is a strong aspect of Christian theology, it had a mixed reception in climate change narratives. As one participant said, *"Forgiveness comes from God, but only when you have truly repented. It is not for us to give forgiveness to ourselves or to each other."* (W)



Hinduism



Photo: Chandana Perera (CC)

The strongest narratives

For Hindus, all three narratives below are linked through our interconnectedness. Hindu leaders prepared a declaration on climate change in the lead up to the December 2015 Paris climate change negotiations,¹⁴ which built on a previous declaration in 2009.¹⁵

The Earth is precious - connectedness

Hindus see the natural world as an expression of the divine: *"God is everywhere especially in the water and the Earth. Prithvi is mother Earth - she is always with us."* (I). Their language stresses our interconnection with the natural world, quoting Krishna saying *"I'm the Earth, I'm the water, I'm the air."* (I). Therefore, as the Hindu Declaration says, *"We cannot destroy nature without destroying ourselves. Man is integrally linked to the whole of Creation."* (D)

We are disrupting the balance

Hindus believe we are one part of a highly organised cosmic order named *Rta*. The Hindu declaration said *"Climate change is a stark symptom of the deeper problem of humanity living out of balance with what Bhūmi Devi, our shared planet, can renewably provide."* (D). Among Hindus with a connection to South Asia, the disruption of seasons and the monsoon has a particularly strong salience.

However, different traditions disagree on the extent to which we can influence the wider world. Climate change can be best presented to Hindus as a 'disruption' requiring action as a means to restore peace and balance.

We live our faith through our actions

In Hinduism, one shows observance, and is rewarded, through one's acts. The internal change in values is as important as the outward change in behaviour. As the Hindu Declaration said, *"We become servants of the Divine, all our actions, including those in protection of the world around us and all the beings therein, becoming acts of worship."* (D)

Messaging for Hindus should appeal to personal duty/service, and stress visible actions, especially around personal behaviour, that can lead to a life of goodness and purity, called *Sattva*. Sacrifice has mixed meaning for Hindus, but abstinence is resonant across Hinduism. Governments are often distrusted as the generator of change and the major focus is on making change in an individual's family or community.

Other successful language

Climate change is a moral challenge

Hindu morality is based around *dharma*, an ethical code of duties, morality and eternal principles. Because it is grounded in universal laws, Hindu morality can readily accept acts that have wider consequences: *“Even though you may not feel it here, someone will feel it somewhere in another country so we need to take ownership of our actions”* (W). Climate change can readily be understood as a form of violence (see below).

Journeys

Hinduism contains many analogues, metaphors and stories around journeys and even has a dedicated god, *Ganesh*, for journeys. Hindu theology sees life as a journey between the four stages (celibate, householder, hermit, renunciation). There is also a journey to different levels of incarnation. Language around climate change as a journey that offers ‘pathways’ to solutions works well for Hindus.

Violence

One of the core principles in *dharma* is the abhorrence of violence¹⁶ and causing harm to others (*ahimsa*). Although climate change is sometimes talked of as a form of violence, this is rarely from a faith perspective. For Hindus this is powerfully resonant, as the Hindu Declaration says, *“climate change creates pain, suffering, and violence.”* (D)

Spiritual teachers and family role models

There is a strong teaching tradition in Hinduism with an emphasis on wisdom and spiritual teachers, sometimes called *gurus*. A survey comment suggested that *“different messages could be delivered through different kinds of gurus. Some gurus have the tone of putting the fear of God in the minds of followers, while others focus on love and change.”* The home plays a central role in Hindu life and observance is largely in households. This makes it harder to reach people through institutions but raises the possibility of working through family role models/communicators, especially the senior family members (often referred to as uncles and aunties in Indian English).

What does not work

Judgment and blame

A key difference with other faiths, observed in the workshop, is the lack of a strict creed: *“There are no do’s and don’ts”* (W). *“There is no God sitting in judgment – it’s all cause and effect. If you are doing something positive or negative it’s going to have consequences.”* (I). As a result Hindus do not feel entitled to judge the behaviour of other Hindus and reacted strongly against language that suggested that ‘we are all to blame’. Similarly, language presenting climate change as a form of disobedience was strongly rejected.

Testing

Testing language does not work with Hindus. *“God is a teacher not a tester. God is very forgiving and can accept that you’ve been naughty.”* (W)

Forgiveness

There is no strong sense of a divine or social forgiveness. The laws of *karma* ensure that wrongful actions bring consequences and it is for people to feel their own responsibility. For this reason shame is a very strong concept, though Hindus are not sure that climate change is a category of misdemeanor that requires shame.



Islam



Photo: Trey Ratcliff (CC)

The strongest narratives

The three narratives below were also the dominant narratives in the Islamic Declaration on Global Climate Change signed in August 2015 by Islamic leaders from 20 countries.¹⁷

All narratives need to be rooted or built on language from the Qur'an and the *Sunnah/Hadith* (sayings, doings, affirmations) of the Prophet Mohammed, which are regarded by Muslims as the source of all truth and guidance: *"Whatever is happening today was predicted in the Qur'an."* (W)

Earth care - a precious gift

Muslims see the world as the creation of Allah: *"Allah created the universe in all its diversity, richness and vitality."* (D). However *"Muslims don't serve Creation, they serve the Creator by caring for that Creation"* (I). Language around Creation as a *Ni'mat* (which can be translated as gift, blessing or favor) is resonant: *"Excessive pollution from fossil fuels threatens to destroy the gifts bestowed on us by Allah... Our attitude to these gifts has been short-sighted, and we have abused them."* (D). Although they accept the term 'stewards', the preferred language for Muslims is that we are *khalifah* (successors, caretakers or guardians) of Creation.

Climate change is disrupting the balance

For Muslims, the natural balance is strongly associated with behavioural rules and justice. The Arabic word *mīzān* denotes equilibrium, balance and the scales on which all deeds are weighted. The Qur'an frequently mentions balance in both senses, for example: *"He raised the heaven and established the balance, so that you would not transgress the balance."* (Qur'an 55: 7-10)

Balance figured prominently in the Islamic Declaration: *"The Earth functions in natural seasonal rhythms and cycles. Climate change is a result of the human disruption of this balance."* (D). In the workshops, seasonal 'confusion' generated strong discussion: *"It's confusing everyone, even the plants are confused."* (W)

We live our faith through our actions

For Muslims, all actions serve Allah: *"all good deeds are for His sake"* (W); *"whatever we do is to please and serve Allah"* (W); *"no part of life is not affected by faith, Islam is about living."* (W). In Islam both ritual worship (*ibadah*) and actions/social transactions (*amal/mu'amalat*) are encapsulated in the broader concept in Islam of worship.

Islam contains a strong belief that all actions have consequences for which we will be answerable to Allah. The word 'consequences' appears throughout the Islamic Declaration, which concludes: *"How will we face our Lord and Creator?"* (D). The Qur'an is critical of waste (*israf*), especially the waste of food and water, which is a useful entry for discussions about reducing energy and resource use.

Other successful language

Climate change is a moral challenge

Muslims also responded strongly to language around intergenerational responsibility and our responsibility to care for the poor and vulnerable. Muslims accept the use of strongly critical words such as destruction and corruption, citing a key verse from the Qur'an: *"You have, by your behaviour corrupted land and sea - so turn back so you can learn from your mistakes."* (Qur'an 30:40)

Signs

The Arabic word for signs, *ayah*, is used to describe each verse in the Qur'an. The same term is used for the signs of Creation. Over 700 verses in the Qur'an refer to nature and natural phenomena, inviting people to constantly look for and interpret natural signs from Allah.

Journey

Language around journeys is found throughout the Qur'an and workshop participants regularly used metaphors for journeys: *"With each step you make, you will be given more of a reward."* (W) *"Spiritual life is a journey, with trials and tests along the way."* (W)

What does not work

Blame

Language framing the problem as 'our fault' was considered too negative. The male Muslim workshop proposed a positive framing leading with a values aspiration followed by an admonition to action: *"if we want to be obedient servants we have to do this."* (W)

Overstating human agency

While recognising human responsibility for climate change, Muslim workshop participants all stressed the limits of human power: *"We don't have the power to restore the natural order. All the power is with Allah."* (W). One participant insisted that the assertion 'we can solve this problem', must be followed by the phrase 'God willing/inshallah'. (W)

Planetary limits

Language about planetary boundaries or limits is very common in environmentalism (for example the 1972 Club of Rome book *"The Limits to Growth"* is a key founding text in modern environmentalism). However this language was unanimously rejected by Muslims in the workshops. They argued that Allah is always bountiful. One participant responded that *"The problem is not meeting the greed, but the gluttony itself."* (W). The limits must therefore be self-imposed through moral principle and minimising greed or waste.

Tests

All of life is a test for Muslims, and the theme of divine tests runs throughout the Qur'an, so this language should work well, but the workshops had a mixed response to language describing climate change as a divine test.



Judaism



Photo: Matt McKnight (CC)

The strongest narratives

The three narratives below were closely associated and could be seen to comprise one narrative.

Many Jews have a particularly strong sense of a global identity based around shared cultural values that extends beyond religious observance. One of these is a commitment to social justice, which they identify with more than faith observance – it was revealing that in the narrative workshop people referred to Judaism as a ‘backdrop’ to their upbringing and attitudes.

There was no Jewish climate change declaration in 2015, so we quote from an the earlier “Jewish Environmental and Energy Imperative” prepared in 2012.¹⁸

Creation

Jewish narratives around Creation care enjoyed a positive response: *“We are caretakers of Creation. We learn to use it for our own benefit, but we are not allowed to wastefully use it or damage it, we have to utilise it for needs but not confusing wants with our needs.”* (W). There was preference for the verb ‘defending’ rather than ‘protecting’ the Earth.

Moral justice

There was a strong agreement that climate change was a moral issue. The focus on justice as a core value was very marked and language around social justice and intergenerational rights scored highly: *“We weep at the heavy burden that climate change imposes on the world’s poor... we tremble at the harm we impose upon our own descendants.”* (D). Participants in the Jewish workshop were adamant that *“Climate change is a moral problem of failings in real world politics... You can judge a society by how it treats its most vulnerable.”* (W)

There is a strong sense among Jews of the movement of history – one participant noted that *“Ancient traditions connect us with our ancestry – the universe is moving towards something. History matters.”* Intergenerational equity, especially to children, is also a very strong value.

Action

Judaism is an action-based faith: *“We are a people of menders, of healers, and our fractured planet – compound fractures, at that – cries out for healing.”* (D). Faith is expressed through practice of good moral deeds, the *Mitzvah*: *“The relationship with God has to be translated into deeds.”* (W). Judaism is less creedal than Christianity and Islam and is strongly grounded in making real change in the world through the political and judicial realms.

Judaism (drawing on the Book of Deuteronomy) also contains strong injunctions against wasteful consumption as damaging to Creation. During the weekly *Shabbat*, Jews are required to actively switch off machines and save energy as a “*weekly ritual of sparseness and frugality*”. (I)

Compared with other faiths, Judaism also has a strong understanding of the morality of inaction that is directly relevant to climate change. “*Our holiday season is an attempt to take stock of missed opportunities and do repentance.*” Jews talk of an “*unheard call*”, suggesting something on the periphery that people don’t want to listen to.

Other successful language

Balance (and restoration)

In Judaism, there is a strong belief that a harmonious order was “*created by a good God*” (I). According to the Book of Genesis, order comes out of chaos, and the only thing that can return it to chaos is human misbehaviour. Jews draw on a traumatic collective history and struggle for survival, most recently through the Holocaust, and express pride in their resilience and recovery. Jews respond strongly to the narrative arc that, through our actions we can restore balance: “*Renewal is a powerful idea. God renews his Creation every day. In the last chapters of Isaiah he talks about a new Creation and a new Earth.*” (W). The Hebrew word *tikkun*, meaning rectification or “*repairing broken shards*” is especially resonant. The 2003 Jewish Declaration calls on Jews to “*restore what has been ruined, make straight the crooked way.*” (D)

Trusted communicators

The central role of a rabbi is that of a wisdom teacher, to teach you how to live the good, virtuous, and happy life: “*We are not hierarchical, so who are we talking to and who in that community is most respected? It might be a rabbi or someone high up. We have a meritocracy so the question is who has established themselves with a track record. Who is looked up to on other issues.*” (W). “*Amongst younger Jews you have to have credibility... that you have actually done something, so this can extend to scientists and activists.*” (W)

What does not work

Blame and judgment

Interviewees and workshop participants both challenged language around divine judgment, sin and punishment saying that “*It’s better to appeal to a person’s sense of responsibility and engagement... and talk about how distraction in the material world comes at the cost of deeper meaning.*” (W). Nobody liked the language of blame, preferring to find positive language based on personal action; that we “*have a responsibility to get closer to God by addressing climate change rather than climate change being a monster with its hands around us.*” (W)

Exalting Poverty

Judaism has less of an ascetic tradition than other faiths, and participants were wary of any language that appeared to tolerate poverty: “*We want to stop suffering, we want to stop poverty. The focus should be on waste, but not poverty.*” (W). This extended to concerns that reducing emissions might unfairly penalise poorer people as “*there are times, especially amongst the disenfranchised in our world, that there are few green alternatives for providing the basic necessities of life.*” (S). Instead they stressed that the motivation for personal action should be positive arguments around the interpretation of a ‘good life’.



Appendix I Methodology

Photo: [Hen3k Hen3k](#) (CC)

Interviews

Structured interviews were held with faith experts.

Buddhism

- Lokabandhu - Executive Committee Member, Network of Buddhist Organisations, UK

Christianity

- Dr Richard Cizik - Co-founder of New Evangelical Partnership for the Common Good, US
- The Rev. Canon Giles Goddard - Vicar of St John's Church, Waterloo, London, UK

Hinduism

- Sanjeev Kumar - Founder, Change Partnership, Belgium
- Shaunaka Rishi Das - Director, Centre for Hindu Studies, Oxford, UK

Islam

- Fazlun Khalid - Founder, Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Science, UK
- Dawud Price - Facilitator, Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environmental Science, UK

Judaism

- Rabbi Lawrence Troster - Founder, Shomrei Breishit: Rabbis and Cantors For the Earth, US

Multi-faith

- The Rev. Fletcher Harper - Greenfaith, US
- Jeff Korgen, Tessa Tennant and other members of OurVoices Network, International
- Erin Biviano - Center for the Study of Science and Religion at Columbia University, US

Narratives design

Climate Outreach generated core narratives from these interviews and a review of previous engagement materials and faith climate statements. These narratives were woven into a single text in the form of a speech or sermon. It starts with the causes and solutions to climate change, continues through the actions to be taken, and ends with a resolution (see Appendix II for the trial test).

Narrative workshops

Six narrative workshops were held in London during April and May 2015. There was one workshop for each of the five faiths with parallel male and female groups for Muslims. Each group had between six and fifteen participants. Recruitment was channelled through the relevant faith networks along criteria that included:

- A balanced gender split
- Ethnic diversity with an emphasis on participants born outside the UK
- A mix of traditions within each faith group (for example, Catholics, Protestants and Evangelicals from within the Christian faith)
- People from a range of backgrounds (including age, class and political worldview)
- Mixed levels of environmental and climate concern, with a preference for those who were sceptical or not yet actively engaged

Apart from the predominantly male Buddhist group, gender was well balanced and age distribution was varied (spanning 16-92) across all groups. The Muslim and Christian groups were especially diverse. All of the Hindus had parents of Indian origin, whether from the diaspora in East Africa or India itself. The Buddhist participants were all from Sri Lanka. The socio-political background of all groups was mixed except the Jewish group which was predominantly British born, middle-class, and liberal politically.

During the first hour of the workshop, participants discussed their values and sense of identity, the role their faith plays in their lives, their hopes and aspirations for the future and the big issues facing society. The topic of climate change was then introduced through this lens in order to explore how participants' religious values and worldviews affect their attitudes and beliefs about the environment and climate change. In the second hour, participants evaluated the narratives and highlighted (in different coloured markers) the text that resonated with their values and what they felt was inappropriate. They then discussed their responses.

Online survey

The narratives were refined and presented in an online survey which ran for two weeks in May 2015, promoted through the GreenFaith network, the OurVoices campaign, Twitter, and a range of associated religious channels. It had a total of 652 responses and over one thousand additional comments. The online survey played a valuable role in supplementing and supporting the primary data collected in the narrative workshops, corroborating many of the key findings with a larger sample. Comments provided by participants have been absorbed into the overall findings above.

The survey's strongest representation was from women (60% of respondents) and those over 40 years old (78%) – 41% of whom were over 60. Respondents reported a high level of commitment to their faith: 56% said that their faith was 'central to their identity'; and 26% said that it was 'important' and they followed its main teachings. Of the five main faith groups, the strongest response was from Christians (64%). The low number of responses from Muslims and Hindus, although useful and indicative, means the survey cannot provide definitive guidance on language that works across all five faiths.

Although the majority of participants were based in North America and the United Kingdom, people from fifty two other countries participated, which was especially useful in evaluating the range of opinion within faiths.

Appendix II

Script for Narrative Workshops

Photo: James Wheeler (CC)

In the narrative workshops, the core narratives and key words were woven into a single piece of text in the style of a speech or sermon moving from problem to action to resolution. The concepts explored are referenced in the left column.

In the online survey, shorter narratives (relating to distinct underlying concepts) were presented, and comments invited on them individually.

Earth care	God's creation is all around us in all the living things and in the abundance of the natural world. We are in awe of God's creation and it speaks to God's glory and power. Serving it is an act of worship. God entrusted us with the sacred responsibility to be its stewards. From it we have built our civilisation and prosperity.
Actions	It contains all we need but cannot provide all we want or desire.
Balance	The divine intelligence made the world in balance. But now we have broken that balance. The seasons are coming at the wrong times. Flowers are blooming too early or too late. The rivers are flooding and then running dry.
Balance Signs Consequences	God is sending us clear signs from every corner of Creation – in the increasing floods, droughts, storms and heat waves – that we are moving from order into chaos. We have been disobedient. Through our ignorance, arrogance and greed, we have harmed the Earth and broken our relationship with Creation.
Clean/Dirty	The world has been polluted and desecrated by our dirty fuels and our greed for material things.
Moral challenge	This is a moral challenge. We are harming the poor and vulnerable. We should be generous and care for them but they will be the worst hurt. It is an act of injustice for which we will be judged.
Truth	Climate change is like a shadow spreading across the world. We need to walk again in the light of truth. That truth is that we are violating God's creation. Yet we do not admit what we are doing. Some deny it, and spread lies and falsehoods.
Wake up!	Most of us try to hide it from God and from each other. We never mention it and pretend to be asleep.

Test	Climate change is a test of our faith. It holds us back from making progress and getting closer to God. We will be called upon to account for it.
Earth care Closer to God	Climate change calls on us to act boldly in defence of Creation. It is a calling here and now, to see and think more clearly and deeply about how to live our lives and how to get closer to God and Creation.
Actions	<p>The answers are inside ourselves. Things will only change when we change ourselves, return to the path of truth and honour our Creator. We need to control our desires and stifle our greed. We do this as an offering to God. If we need to make sacrifices we will do so as our duty, just as we would make sacrifices for our parents, or our children.</p> <p>We are God's children. We contain the spark of our Creator and the divine intelligence and wisdom. We can solve this problem.</p>
Closer to God	We need action at all levels – government, business, nations and community. But as people of faith, we have a vital role to play. Because of our special relationship with God and Creation we have the power to restore the natural order.
Closer to God	Our sacred texts contain clear instructions on how to behave, be good and get closer to God. Through our actions, and our faith, we can lead through example, inspire others and be teachers to the rest of the world.
Clean/Dirty	We can abandon the dirty fuels that are polluting Creation. We can cleanse ourselves and find ways of living that are pure and clean. We call on God to forgive us so that we can start anew.
Closer to God	<p>By accepting our responsibility and sharing that truth, we will transform ourselves.</p> <p>Climate change is an invitation to love more and come closer to God.</p>
Truth	We will wear that belief upon ourselves and carry it out into the world, share it and speak to it.
Consequences	And when we return to this world we shall be rewarded for our defence of God's creation.
Closer to God	By taking action our faith can rediscover itself and renew itself. Accepting this challenge enables us to love in a new way, spreading God's love and justice to all, building happiness and community.



References & Further Reading

Photo: Sterne Pierregarin (CC)

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Further reading

Alliance of Religions and Conservation <http://www.arcworld.org>

EcoAmerica <http://ecoamerica.org> & <http://blessedtomorrow.org/leaders>

Yale Project on Climate Change Communication <http://environment.yale.edu/climate-communication/articles/archives/C18> & <http://fore.yale.edu/>



Five Narratives That Work Across Faiths

Photo: [Rick Chan](#) (CC)

Earth care - a precious gift

Climate change is a moral challenge

Climate change is disrupting the natural balance

We live our faith through our actions

I take a personal pledge