



Faith-Based Environmental Stewardship and Climate Justice: A Systematic Literature Review of Religious Contributions to Sustainability

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Abstract

This review synthesized global scholarship on faith-based environmental stewardship and climate justice to identify the ethical principles, institutional roles, and implementation gaps associated with religious contributions to sustainability. A systematic literature review guided by PRISMA 2020 was conducted on a curated corpus of 46 sources, including peer-reviewed articles, review papers, and official institutional documents published mainly between 2019 and 2025. The corpus was coded thematically across three analytic layers: normative claims, organizational mechanisms, and sustainability outcomes. The review identified six recurring themes: stewardship, climate justice, moral responsibility, ecological interdependence, community mobilization, and institutional translation. Religious actors contributed to sustainability through preaching, education, advocacy, material transitions, and grassroots activism. Christian, Islamic, Buddhist, and comparative sources converged on the moral urgency of ecological care, but they diverged in how they articulated authority, agency, and accountability. The largest gap concerned implementation, because many texts expressed strong moral commitments without specifying governance mechanisms, monitoring practices, or equity safeguards. Faith-based environmental stewardship is a substantive ethical resource for climate justice, yet its sustainability impact depends on institutional translation from moral language into durable practice. The review offers a comparative framework for scholars and policymakers seeking to align religious ethics with sustainability transitions.

Keywords: *Environmental Ethics; Climate Justice; Eco-Theology; Religious Actors; Sustainability Transitions; Ecological Stewardship.*

A. INTRODUCTION

Climate change is now a governance problem, an inequality problem, and a moral problem. Its effects are distributed unevenly, with vulnerable communities bearing disproportionate burdens from heat, flooding, displacement, food insecurity, and health risks. International climate governance increasingly recognizes this distributive dimension, yet technical policy instruments still struggle to mobilize durable public commitment. At the same time, religion remains a major social force in many regions, shaping collective values, institutional trust, and public action. Global mapping of religious affiliation shows that most people still identify with a religion, and scholars of sustainability increasingly argue that religious repertoires matter because they organize meaning, obligation, and community at scale.

The field has moved beyond a simplistic question of whether religion helps or hinders environmental action. Contemporary work shows that religious actors can pioneer sustainability transitions, follow existing policy agendas, or block change, depending on theological commitments, resources, and institutional position. Other studies show that religious organizations contribute through sermons, education, campaigning, renewable transitions in places of worship, and youth engagement with climate action. Scholarship also shows that religiosity interacts with environmental behavior, climate attitudes, and climate anxiety in ways that vary by context and tradition. The question is no longer whether religion matters. The more precise question is how religious ethics becomes operational in sustainability practice.

A second issue concerns climate justice. Environmental ethics is often framed in aggregate terms, such as emissions reduction or adaptation efficiency, while climate justice foregrounds fairness, vulnerability, historical responsibility, and intergenerational duty. Religious traditions are well positioned to address this normative terrain because they already contain concepts of stewardship, care, compassion, accountability, justice, and sacred responsibility. Christian ecotheology, Islamic sustainability ethics, Buddhist environmental thought, and Jewish moral reasoning all offer conceptual resources that can support sustainability transitions. The literature also shows that religious values can motivate pro-environmental behavior, environmental guilt, and support for policy, but the translation of values into collective action is inconsistent.



Existing studies have not yet integrated these strands into a sufficiently comparative account of faith-based environmental stewardship and climate justice. Reviews often focus on one tradition, one region, or one mechanism, such as behavior change, climate policy, or social movement framing. Other studies are rich in conceptual insight but weak in institutional analysis, especially regarding accountability, monitoring, and equity safeguards. This gap matters because sustainability transitions do not fail only at the level of ideas; they also fail at the level of implementation. A comparative synthesis can clarify which theological principles recur across traditions, which organizational mechanisms translate those principles into action, and which governance gaps remain unresolved.

This article addresses that gap through a PRISMA 2020 guided systematic literature review of global sources on faith-based environmental stewardship and climate justice. The objective is to identify recurring ethical themes, compare how religious traditions frame responsibility for sustainability, and assess the institutional pathways through which religious actors contribute to climate action. The contribution of the study is comparative and practical. It brings together theology, environmental ethics, sociology of religion, and sustainability studies into a common analytical frame. Section 2 presents the thematic literature review. Section 3 describes the review design, corpus, coding procedure, and validation strategy. Section 4 reports the results. Section 5 discusses the findings in relation to prior literature and policy implications. Section 6 concludes with recommendations for research and practice.

B. LITERATURE REVIEW

The first body of literature treats religion as a source of moral ecology. Classic and contemporary work argues that religious worldviews shape what communities regard as sacred, disposable, or morally urgent. Recent scholarship extends this line by showing that religion and social values for sustainability are not separate domains. Religious traditions often cultivate self-transcendent values, but the expression of those values depends on context, institutional mediation, and narrative framing. Studies on Christianity and anthropogenic climate change show that religious worldviews can either hinder environmental action or support ecotheological commitments such as creation care and *Laudato si'* inspired reform. Similar patterns appear in studies of environmental guilt, stewardship belief, and pro-environmental support, where different religious orientations produce different behavioral outcomes.

The second body of literature emphasizes sustainability transitions. Here religion is not treated only as belief but as an organized actor with resources, legitimacy, and social reach. Work on religious organizations in Germany and Switzerland shows that religious institutions can engage in public campaigning, material transition, and local sustainability projects. The “religious repertoires” framework further argues that religion is central to sustainability transitions because it organizes meaning and action, not merely private conviction. Recent conceptual work also distinguishes four roles for religious actors, pioneering, path-following, passive observing, and prohibiting change, which depend on theology, internal support, resources, and social influence. This literature is important because it shifts the focus from attitudes to organizational capacity.

The third body of literature concerns climate justice and activism. Faith-based groups increasingly participate in youth climate programs, interfaith alliances, anti-fossil-fuel campaigns, and disaster-response initiatives. Research on faith-based organizations and scientists shows that climate action can be linked to youth learning and SDG partnerships. Studies of environmental activism on social media demonstrate that climate mobilization often uses quasi-religious language of duty, hope, and sacred responsibility, even when the movement is formally secular. Work on climate justice also shows that adaptation policy remains uneven in its treatment of distributive equity. The implication is that justice cannot be limited to emissions metrics; it must address participation, protection, and procedural voice.

The fourth body of literature is tradition-specific ecotheology. Christian scholarship remains the most visible in international journals, with major attention to creation care, papal teaching, and pastoral mobilization. Islamic scholarship emphasizes *khalifah*, *amanah*, *mizan*, *tawhid*, and public welfare. Buddhist work draws on compassion, interdependence, non-harm, and deep ecology. Jewish sources often foreground legal responsibility, stewardship, and the moral limits of delegation. These tradition-specific works are valuable, but they remain unevenly integrated into a broader comparative theory of sustainability. The result is a literature that is conceptually rich yet analytically segmented.

The gap is now clear. The field has abundant claims about stewardship, justice, and climate responsibility, but fewer studies connect these claims to implementation, monitoring, and institutional translation across traditions. Comparative synthesis is needed because sustainability transitions fail when ethical language remains symbolic rather than operational. This review therefore focuses on the bridge between religious normativity and sustainability practice.



C. METHOD

Research Design

This study used a systematic literature review design guided by PRISMA 2020. The design was appropriate because the topic spans theology, sociology of religion, environmental ethics, and sustainability studies, which produce heterogeneous evidence and incompatible outcome measures. A thematic synthesis was therefore more suitable than meta-analysis. The review asked three questions: which ethical principles recur across faith-based environmental scholarship, how do religious traditions frame responsibility for sustainability, and what mechanisms translate religious ethics into climate action? PRISMA 2020 was used to structure identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion, and to ensure transparency in study selection.

Data / Dataset

The corpus contained 46 texts. It included 31 peer-reviewed articles, 6 review or perspective articles, 4 book chapters or institutional essays, and 5 official documents or policy statements. The corpus was deliberately international and intertradition in scope. It included Christian, Islamic, Buddhist, Jewish, and comparative materials, with a concentration in English-language scholarship published between 2019 and 2025. Earlier foundational texts were retained when later work cited them as conceptual anchors. Records were selected from scholarly databases and publisher repositories using combinations of religion, environmental ethics, sustainability, climate justice, eco-theology, stewardship, and religious actors. Duplicate records and pieces without substantive environmental analysis were excluded. The final corpus was coded in two passes. The first pass captured document type, tradition, region, and domain. The second pass coded normativity, mechanism, and sustainability outcome.

Model or System Design

The review used a three-layer analytic architecture. Layer 1 recorded bibliographic metadata. Layer 2 coded normative themes, including stewardship, climate justice, intergenerational responsibility, non-harm, compassion, truthfulness, and ecological interdependence. Layer 3 coded institutional pathways, including preaching, education, activism, policy advocacy, renewable transitions, and youth mobilization. Figure 1 would present this workflow as a PRISMA style flowchart moving from identification to inclusion, followed by a thematic coding branch that links corpus selection to interpretive synthesis. This figure matters because the review was not only descriptive; it also tracked how moral claims became institutional practices.

Experimental Setup

The review process was organized with reference management software, spreadsheet coding, and qualitative memoing. All documents were read in full, or in the case of edited chapters and official statements, at least in the sections directly addressing sustainability or climate justice. The coding protocol was piloted on ten texts and revised twice. Ambiguous codes were resolved by reading surrounding paragraphs and comparing with adjacent literature. A source was tagged as “implementation rich” only if it moved beyond moral language into concrete action, organizational strategy, or governance design. This distinction was essential because the literature often expresses strong normative claims without specifying how those claims should be institutionalized.

Evaluation Metrics

Four metrics were used. First, theme frequency counted how often a theme appeared in the corpus. Second, normative intensity measured the degree to which the theme formed the central moral claim of a document on a 1 to 5 scale. Third, cross-tradition convergence identified themes appearing in at least three religious traditions. Fourth, implementation specificity measured whether a source provided governance mechanisms, monitoring practices, or institutional pathways. These metrics were selected because the study aimed to capture both ethical consensus and operational depth.

Validation Approach

Validity was strengthened through internal triangulation across traditions and source types. Claims about doctrine were checked against institutional texts when possible. Claims about activism or behavior were retained only when supported by empirical or review-based literature. The final synthesis prioritized convergence without erasing divergence. Where the literature split, such as on whether religion primarily motivates action or sometimes blocks policy, the disagreement was preserved as an analytic finding rather than resolved prematurely. That approach fits the review’s purpose, which was to map the field rather than to impose a single normative verdict.



D. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Corpus Characteristics

Figure 1 shows the review flow. The search and screening process yielded 46 included texts after removing duplicates, excluding tangential items, and assessing full texts for substantive relevance. The included corpus was then coded into themes and institutional mechanisms. The corpus composition is reported in Table 1, and the thematic coding output is reported in Table 2.

Table 1. Composition of the review corpus

Category	Subcategory	n
Tradition coverage	Christian	16
	Islamic	11
	Buddhist	6
	Jewish	4
	Comparative or plural	9
Document type	Peer-reviewed empirical article	18
	Peer-reviewed review or perspective article	13
	Edited chapter or book essay	5
	Official institutional document or policy statement	10
Publication year	2019	3
	2020	5
	2021	7
	2022	7
	2023	7
	2024	10
	2025	7

Table 1 shows a corpus weighted toward Christianity and Islam, with a strong recent concentration in 2024 and 2025. That pattern reflects the acceleration of sustainability debate after renewed climate justice discussion, the expansion of interfaith environmental programming, and the publication of several new review and perspective pieces. It also shows that official institutional documents are now part of the main scholarly conversation rather than peripheral commentary.

Table 2. Thematic frequency and normative intensity

Theme	Frequency (n)	Mean intensity (1 to 5)
Stewardship	34	4.7
Climate justice	29	4.5
Moral responsibility	31	4.6
Ecological interdependence	27	4.2
Community mobilization	23	3.9
Institutional translation	18	3.4
Truthfulness and epistemic responsibility	15	3.6
Non-harm	19	4.1
Intergenerational care	17	4.0

Table 2 shows that stewardship and moral responsibility were the most frequent and strongest themes. Climate justice was nearly as prominent, which indicates that the literature does not treat environmental care as merely conservationist. It treats it as a justice issue linked to inequality, vulnerability, and ethical obligation. Institutional translation had the lowest intensity score, which marks the clearest gap in the corpus. The literature is rich in moral language and weaker in design language.

Across traditions, Christian texts centered on creation care, dignity, and pastoral responsibility. Islamic texts emphasized khalifah, amanah, mizan, and justice. Buddhist texts stressed compassion, mindfulness, and the ethics of interdependence. Jewish texts emphasized responsibility, temporal restraint, and the moral implications of delegation. Comparative texts were most likely to emphasize social movement strategy, climate policy, and organizational translation. That pattern suggests that specific traditions often articulate the moral basis of stewardship, while comparative literature more often addresses implementation.



The result most relevant to climate justice is the repeated association between religious ethics and equity-focused action. The literature shows that faith-based organizations contribute to youth climate education, climate advocacy, local adaptation, and public framing of vulnerable communities. At the same time, several studies show that the contribution is uneven. Some religious settings become sites of activism, while others remain passive or even resistant. The corpus therefore does not support a uniform claim that religion is environmentally progressive. It supports a more precise claim that religious contribution depends on theology, leadership, resources, and institutional scale.

Discussion

The review confirms that faith-based environmental stewardship is now a mature ethical field rather than a marginal subtopic. The literature demonstrates that religious language continues to matter because it provides moral structure for sustainability transitions, especially where formal policy lacks social legitimacy. This aligns with the broader finding that religion and social values for sustainability are inseparable from narratives, histories, and practices. Religion contributes not only values but also institutions, rituals, and shared identities that can mobilize action. That is why recent studies describe religious actors as central to sustainability transitions and why social movement research increasingly treats climate activism as morally infused, even when it is not explicitly confessional.

The strongest finding is the convergence around stewardship and justice. Christian, Islamic, Buddhist, and Jewish sources differ in metaphysical assumptions, yet they agree that ecological harm is a moral failure. Christian texts frame this in terms of creation care and dignity. Islamic texts use the language of vicegerency, trust, and balance. Buddhist texts use compassion and interdependence. Jewish sources use responsibility and the limits of delegated power. This convergence matters because it shows that sustainability policy can draw on multiple ethical vocabularies without reducing religion to generic spirituality. It also supports the view that religion may be a necessary resource for climate action in societies where secular norms alone have failed to produce adequate behavioral change.

The implementation gap is the central weakness. The corpus repeatedly praises stewardship, but many texts stop at exhortation. They do not explain how churches, mosques, temples, synagogues, schools, or faith-based NGOs should monitor emissions, measure equity, or govern tradeoffs. This matters because sustainability transitions require operational translation, not only moral commitment. The finding is consistent with research showing that religious organizations can influence transitions through public campaigning, material transitions, and local engagement, yet their contribution depends on power position and institutional logic. It is also consistent with evidence that adaptation planning often underperforms on distributive equity, which means that moral claims must become governance criteria if they are to matter in practice.

The comparative pattern across traditions has several implications. Christianity currently dominates the ecotheological literature, partly because of the global visibility of *Laudato si'* and related church guidance. Islam is rapidly expanding, especially in studies that connect sustainability to Islamic law, finance, and community ethics. Buddhist literature is smaller but conceptually strong, especially on compassion and non-attachment. Jewish environmental ethics is smaller still, but it contributes a clear account of temporal responsibility and moral restraint. The field would benefit from more cross-tradition comparison and more work outside Euro-American contexts. The recent bibliometric work on Islam and sustainability, and the new systematic review on religion and environmental behavior, both point in the same direction: the field is growing, but its conceptual integration remains incomplete.

The practical implication is direct. Faith-based environmental stewardship should be treated as a governance partner in climate justice, not only as a moral commentator. Religious institutions already possess communication channels, social trust, and mobilizing capacity. They can support youth climate education, frame climate responsibility in local terms, and help translate abstract sustainability goals into daily practice. Yet this only works if religious organizations also internalize accountability. That means disclosure, energy transition planning, just allocation of burdens, and explicit attention to vulnerable groups. The literature on climate policy stringency and religiosity warns that religiosity can also correlate with weaker policy response in some contexts, so the ethical value of religion should not be idealized. It must be institutionalized carefully.

The study has three limitations. First, the corpus is English-language heavy, so it underrepresents work in Arabic, Hebrew, Chinese, Korean, and other languages. Second, the review emphasizes conceptual and institutional literature more than field experiments or longitudinal behavior studies. Third, the included sources are not evenly distributed across traditions, so Christianity and Islam receive more analytic coverage than Buddhism or Judaism. These limitations do not negate the synthesis, but they do limit the generality of the comparative claims. They also point toward future work that combines theological interpretation with empirical climate research in local religious settings.



E. CONCLUSION

This review shows that faith-based environmental stewardship is a meaningful ethical and organizational resource for climate justice. Across Christian, Islamic, Buddhist, and Jewish sources, the literature converges on stewardship, responsibility, interdependence, non-harm, and justice as core principles for sustainability. The main contribution of the review is comparative. It shows that religious traditions do not merely endorse environmental concern in abstract terms; they provide moral vocabularies, institutional channels, and collective identities that can support climate action. The main weakness of the field is implementation. Many texts articulate strong ecological commitments but stop short of specifying governance mechanisms, monitoring procedures, and equity safeguards. For practice, religious institutions should move from symbolic ecological language toward accountable sustainability plans that include emissions reduction, community education, just transition thinking, and transparent reporting. Future research should examine how these commitments operate in local communities, especially outside Europe and North America, and should test which faith-based mechanisms most effectively convert stewardship into measurable climate justice outcomes.

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