



# **Sustainability**

## **In Religious Education:**

### **Where Faith Meets Environmental Stewardship**

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As Earth Day 2026 approaches with its powerful theme '**Our Power, Our Planet**', the message is clear: everyone has the power to contribute to a cleaner, greener world. This theme emphasises the importance of renewable energy sources and sustainable practices, while highlighting something crucial for education—**that each person, including our youngest learners, possesses genuine power to create positive change.**

Religious education is an ideal platform for teaching these vital concepts, where ancient wisdom meets modern environmental challenges and where children discover their own capacity to make a difference.

The intersection of faith and environmental stewardship offers powerful opportunities to engage students in meaningful discussions about renewable energy, sustainability, and our collective responsibility to the planet. Just as renewable energy harnesses the natural power of sun, wind, and water, religious and philosophical traditions have long drawn upon their own sources of spiritual power to guide humanity's relationship with nature. **When children explore these connections, they discover that they too have power—the power to choose, to act, and to inspire others.**

### **Understanding Sustainability in Education: Building Agency and Empowerment**

At its core, sustainability means maintaining an ecological balance by avoiding the depletion of natural resources. In educational contexts, particularly in primary schools, it encompasses teaching children about the delicate balance between environmental protection, social responsibility, and economic development. The UK's Department for Education has recognised this importance through its Sustainability and Climate Change Strategy (2022), highlighting the need for children to understand human impacts on our planet.

### **But understanding alone isn't enough: children need to know they have power to act.**

Sustainability education isn't just about learning problems; it's about empowering children to be part of the solution. When pupils engage with environmental themes through RE, they develop a crucial sense of agency: they discover that their actions matter, their choices have impact, and their voices can contribute to positive change.

This sense of empowerment is vital for children's wellbeing. Rather than feeling overwhelmed by environmental challenges or experiencing eco-anxiety, children who understand their own power become hopeful, motivated, and resilient. **They learn that while the planet's challenges are real, so is their capacity to respond.**

### **Why Religious Education is the Perfect Vehicle for Sustainability Teaching**

The First Faith Pavilion at COP28 (2023) demonstrated something remarkable: nine major faiths and worldviews coming together in unified commitment to climate action. This historic



gathering shows how sustainability is not just appropriate in religious education—it is essential. Here's why:

- It demonstrates sustainability as a shared moral concern across faiths
- It shows the real-world relevance of religious values
- It connects ancient teachings with contemporary challenges
- It presents environmental care as both a scientific and spiritual imperative
- **It reveals that people across history and cultures have recognised their power and responsibility to care for creation**
- **It provides meaningful context for practical action, helping schools fulfil their Climate Action Plans through curriculum-embedded activities rather than add-on initiatives.**

Most importantly, RE provides the 'why' that motivates the 'how'. When children understand that environmental stewardship is rooted in values they're learning about—compassion, justice, stewardship, interconnectedness—they're not just following rules. **They're exercising their power to live according to their values.**

### **Supporting Your School's Climate Action Plan Through Student Agency**

Many schools are now required to develop Climate Action Plans, and RE provides an authentic curriculum space to address these commitments while building genuine student agency. By integrating sustainability into your RE teaching, you're not creating extra work—you're fulfilling multiple objectives simultaneously:

- **Meeting statutory requirements** for climate education whilst delivering your RE curriculum
- **Building whole-school culture** around environmental stewardship through values-based learning
- **Creating pupil climate champions** who understand the 'why' behind sustainable practices and feel empowered to lead
- **Demonstrating impact** through meaningful, curriculum-linked activities rather than standalone initiatives
- **Connecting local action to global values**, helping pupils understand their role in a worldwide movement
- **Developing leadership skills** as children take ownership of sustainability initiatives.

**When pupils explore how different worldviews approach environmental care, they develop both the moral framework and practical motivation to support your school's sustainability goals.** They become active participants rather than passive recipients of information. They move from 'we should reduce energy consumption' to 'we can measure our energy use and develop strategies to reduce it'—from abstract concepts to empowered action.



This shift from understanding to agency is transformative. Children who participate in meaningful climate action through their school day develop:

- **Confidence** in their ability to create change
- **Critical thinking** about complex problems
- **Collaborative skills** as they work with others towards shared goals
- **Hope and resilience** rather than anxiety about the future

### **Diverse Faith Perspectives on Environmental Stewardship: Discovering Our Power to Care**

Different faiths offer unique and complementary perspectives on environmental care, and crucially, **each tradition recognises human power and responsibility to act:**

#### **Buddhism**

Buddhists approach environmental care through the concept of interconnectedness and 'metta' (loving-kindness). The First Precept of 'ahimsa' (non-harm) extends beyond humans to all living beings and their habitats. **Buddhist teaching empowers practitioners to recognise that every action has consequences—and that our choices, however small, ripple outward to affect all beings.**

#### **Christianity**

Modern Christian thinking emphasises both stewardship and responsibility. Pope Francis's 'Laudato Si' stresses that all creation is connected and humans must protect, not exploit nature. Christian organisations actively work to combat climate change through practical initiatives. **The concept of stewardship is fundamentally about recognising our power to care for what has been entrusted to us.**

#### **Islam**

Islamic environmental ethics centre on two key concepts: 'Khalifa' (stewardship) and 'Mizan' (balance). Muslims believe Allah created everything in perfect equilibrium, making environmental protection a religious duty. **As khalifas (trustees), Muslims understand they have been given both the responsibility and the capability to maintain the Earth's balance.**

#### **Judaism**

Through 'Tikkun olam' (repairing the world), Jewish tradition emphasises environmental responsibility. The celebration of Tu B'Shevat (New Year for Trees) demonstrates practical environmental commitment through tree planting and conservation efforts. **'Tikkun olam' is inherently about agency—it literally means we have the power and duty to repair what is broken.**



### **Sikhi**

Sikhs are called to be 'Khalsa'—guardians of both faith and creation. This manifests in practical ways through community initiatives like minimal-waste practices in Gurdwaras and vegetarian/vegan community kitchens (Langar). **The concept of being a guardian emphasises active protection and care—recognising one's power to serve both community and creation.**

### **Modern Worldviews and Environmental Ethics**

It's not just traditional religions that offer perspectives on sustainability and human agency:

#### **Humanism**

Humanists take an evidence-based approach to environmental responsibility, emphasising rational enquiry whilst maintaining a core commitment to kindness towards people, animals, and our planet. **Humanist philosophy places particular emphasis on human capability and responsibility—we have the power to understand our world through reason and the responsibility to use that understanding for good.**

#### **Ethical Veganism**

This worldview extends the Golden Rule to all living beings, considering animal welfare, environmental impact, and social justice as interconnected aspects of sustainable living. **Ethical veganism demonstrates how individual daily choices—what we eat, what we wear, what we buy—are expressions of personal power to reduce harm and create change.**

#### **Empowering Pupils Through Meaningful Action**

For primary-aged children, the key is making these concepts tangible and relatable whilst ensuring they experience genuine agency. Instead of overwhelming young learners with global challenges or making them feel helpless, **create opportunities where they can see their power in action and experience the direct results of their choices.**

The 2026 Earth Day theme 'Our Power, Our Planet' perfectly captures what effective sustainability education should achieve: children recognising and exercising their power to make positive environmental contributions.

**When children see the direct results of their actions—whether it's measuring reduced energy use, watching plants grow in a school garden, or seeing their recycling efforts add up—they develop crucial self-efficacy.** They learn: 'I can make a difference. My choices matter. My actions have real impact.'



Alongside this, it's important to promote 'experiences' rather than 'written activities'. This supports the essence of sustainability because it doesn't create by-products such as printing worksheets. Here are activities that build genuine agency:

- **School garden projects** where children make decisions about planting, nurturing, and harvesting—experiencing their power to grow food and create habitats
- **Recycling initiatives** where pupils track and measure their impact, seeing concrete data on resources saved through their collective action
- **Energy and water monitoring activities** where children become 'Energy Detectives', identifying problems and developing solutions that the whole school can implement
- **Cross-cultural discussions** where pupils explore how people worldwide are exercising their power to create change, inspiring them to develop their own initiatives
- **Pupil-led climate committees** that give children genuine responsibility and decision-making authority for school sustainability initiatives—not token roles, but real leadership
- **Community partnerships** where children collaborate with local organisations, seeing how their school-based actions contribute to broader community goals
- **Student presentations to governors or leadership** where pupils share their findings and recommendations, experiencing their power to influence adult decision-making
- **Peer education programmes** where older pupils teach younger ones about sustainability, recognising their power to inspire and educate others.

**The crucial element: ensure children have genuine autonomy and see real outcomes.** When sustainability activities are adult-directed with predetermined outcomes, children learn compliance. When they're given problems to solve, decisions to make, and responsibility for outcomes, they learn agency.

*(See the document, [Earth Day 2026: Practical Activities for Schools and Families](#) for more ideas on how to celebrate Earth Day and incorporate sustainability into your school.)*

### **Looking Forward: Raising a Generation Who Knows Their Power**

As we face increasing environmental challenges, the integration of sustainability education with religious and ethical teachings becomes ever more vital. By helping young people understand how different faiths and worldviews approach environmental stewardship, we foster both spiritual awareness and ecological responsibility—**whilst giving them practical tools, genuine agency, and the confidence to exercise their power to make a difference.** The beauty of teaching sustainability through religious education lies in its ability to show children that caring for our planet isn't just a modern concern—it's deeply rooted in human wisdom traditions across cultures and times. Through this lens, environmental stewardship becomes not just a duty, but a shared expression of our highest values and a source of hope and empowerment for the next generation.



**The 2026 Earth Day theme reminds us: 'Our Power, Our Planet'. When we teach children that they genuinely possess power—to choose, to act, to lead, to inspire, to create change—we're not just educating them about sustainability. We're raising a generation who understands their capacity to shape the future.**

By embedding these activities in your RE curriculum, you're not just teaching about sustainability—you're creating young people who:

- Understand why environmental care matters across cultures and beliefs
- Feel equipped and empowered to act on their values
- See themselves as valuable contributors to positive environmental change
- Possess the confidence, skills, and moral framework to exercise their power responsibly
- Approach the future with hope, resilience, and determination rather than anxiety or helplessness.

**Our power. Our planet. Our children. Our future.**