

Messages to mobilise people of faith on climate change



[Our Voices](#) (a campaign of GreenFaith and the Conservation Foundation) commissioned the [Climate Outreach & Information Network \(COIN\)](#) to develop and test language around climate change that could mobilise activity across the world's 5 main faith groups: Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish and Muslim.

COIN developed trial narratives¹ and identified key framing² language from 3 sources: interfaith statements on climate change, interviews with faith experts, and COIN's extensive [experience developing climate change communications for distinct audiences](#). These trial narratives were then tested in narrative workshops, one per faith.³ Each workshop contained 10 to 20 participants, with a balance of gender, age and country of origin. Additional feedback was gathered through an online survey. The following topline conclusions are taken from the internal report for Our Voices, which we hope to build on in the future.

5 overall lessons

1. Be Cautious With Blame And Fear

Consistent with wider research,⁴ the majority of people in the narrative workshops rejected messages based on fear and punishment ([We have been disobedient. Climate change is a test and we will be called to account](#)). They argued that people do not intend harm through their actions and that they require love and support rather than judgment.

Blame is more complex. People accepted ethical criticism ([we have been greedy, arrogant](#)) when it was presented as a universal failing and joined with positive injunctions to live better ([we will live by our principles, living a simple life](#)). Although not tested in this research, some people will support blame when it is focused on external actors such as governments or oil companies, though wider research finds that anti-business narratives are often problematic for conservatives.⁵

2. Present Threats And Solutions In Terms Of Core Values

People are more inclined to accept climate change when it is presented within narratives that validate their values and identity. All groups strongly favoured language that validated their core beliefs and presented threats in terms of core faith values - of which "protecting the earth/God's creation/the poor and vulnerable" were the most universally appealing.

Therefore communicators should be saying: [These are things you care about. Climate change threatens the things you love. It worsens the problems you have always tried to solve. Its solutions reinforce what you support.](#)

1. Narratives can be defined as "language designed to give coherence to the world in the form of stories shared between social peers"

2. Frames are individual words or short phrases that embody wider cultural or metaphorical meaning

3. For Muslims, there were separate male and female narrative workshops

4. <http://talkingclimate.org/guides/using-scare-tactics-does-it-work/>

5. McCright, A., 2011, Political orientation moderates Americans' beliefs and concern about climate change, *Climatic Change*, January 2011, Volume 104, Issue 2, pp 243-253

3. Promote Rewards Of Stronger Faith And Belonging

The motivations that worked best were those that rewarded action in terms of faith values: [Here is how you wish to be in your own life. Action on climate change makes you become a better person and a stronger member of your faith.](#)

There are two complementary approaches which worked equally well in testing: [Through action on climate change we better meet our spiritual objectives \(become better/closer to God\)](#) and [By being better people \(living out our moral values\) we will be better able to take action on climate change.](#)

However, most people rejected the opposite language: that inaction on climate change makes us bad people or distances us from God.

4. Create A Narrative Arc

All faith traditions are built on stories and parables that contain a narrative arc of redemption and restoration. Heroes face a **challenge** that threatens to harm people and destabilise the wider order. They take **action** which – after a struggle – achieves a **resolution** in which order is restored and the moral values in question are affirmed.

The narrative of climate change is best presented as a positive narrative within which action **restores** order and well-being: [through action we can make the world better \(in terms of our faith values\)](#). The desired outcome will differ between groups: for some it will be healthier/safer, for others more caring/loving/just, and for others more sacred/holy.

5. Find Specific Language For Each Faith Within A Narrative Theme

All faiths require language and images that speak to their own traditions and are built directly on the teachings of their own sacred texts. Much of this language cannot be applied across faiths. For example, some core concepts in the Abrahamic traditions (a personal God, creation, judgement, forgiveness, redemption) cannot be applied literally to Buddhism and Hinduism.

For these reasons, it is almost impossible to find language general enough to speak across all faiths yet specific enough to galvanise individuals within each faith. The narratives recommended below highlight overall themes which need to be tailored carefully for each audience, and expanded in terms of their specific teachings and traditions.

5 narratives that work

The findings of the narrative workshops and the online survey pointed to 5 narratives as being the most effective for speaking to participants' faith values. The text in blue below tested positively with all groups. Importantly, none of these narratives were rejected by participants from any particular faith, suggesting that they work well *across* faith groups. The keywords below (also known as frames) were generated by participants within group discussions and from online comments, and have not been tested across all faith groups.

1. Earth (Creation) Care

Tested language	God/the divine is manifested in/speaks through the earth/natural world around us. We have a sacred responsibility to care for the earth. The natural world is a precious gift.
Narrative arc	We have been entrusted with the care of the earth. Climate change is harming the earth. We need to return to our proper relationship to it. When we do, the world is restored to its natural abundance.
Keywords	Creation, nature, living things, respect, responsibility, care, nurture, flourish, productivity, restore
Application	The world as a gift that we have a responsibility to care for is a principle that crosses all faiths. However, more than any other narrative, this requires varied and careful application. Language about divine 'creation' and the 'productivity' of the earth only works well with Abrahamic faiths. Language around the "natural world" works better with Buddhists and Hindus.

2. Moral Challenge

Tested language	Climate change is a moral challenge. It is harming the poor and vulnerable - the very people our faith tells us to protect. We should care for these people, not worsen their lives. It is our responsibility to preserve the legacy of our parents and provide for the future of our children.
Narrative arc	We have a moral obligation not to harm others and to be fair, care for the poor and vulnerable, provide for our children and respect future generations. Climate change will hurt the most vulnerable now and in the future. When we take action the world becomes fairer, the vulnerable are better cared for and we fulfil our duty to those who came before us and will come after us.
Keywords	Care, love, harm, vulnerable, poor, born and unborn, ancestors
Application	All faiths contain sacred values that require us to protect the vulnerable and condemn harm to others. Climate change is a process spread over time, and future generations are important to all groups.

3. Balance

Tested language	Climate change is disrupting the natural balance in the world. The seasons are coming at the wrong times. Climate change is a message that something is wrong.
Narrative arc	We should respect and maintain the natural order and the universal systems which govern the earth. Climate change is tipping the natural order off balance, leading to instability and chaos. When we take action, the world returns to its natural order and stability is restored.
Keywords	Stability/instability, order/disorder, balance/imbalance, chaos
Application	Many people who are not engaged by abstract science are concerned by extreme weather events and the disruption of familiar climate patterns. All faiths (especially Buddhists and Hindus) recognise a divine order and stress the importance of authority and stability. Not all faiths are comfortable with the idea that humans have the power to tip this natural balance, or the ability to restore it. However, it is effective to talk about the role of climate change in causing instability and disruption.

4. Action

Tested language	Our faith is our way of life. It is what we say and do every day. We have been arrogant, ignorant, greedy and wasteful. To fulfil our duty we will live by our principles, gladly living a simple, contented and fulfilled life. We recognise the need for action at all levels - government, business, nations and community - and in our personal lives.
Narrative arc	We express our faith through our actions. When we live more simply, in a way that does not impact on the climate, we become better people and our actions are more in harmony with our faith.
Keywords	Consumption, greed, simplicity, clarity, harmony, honesty, integrity
Application	All of the faith groups have injunctions against waste, excessive consumption and taking an unfair share of common resources. Although this narrative contains a message of blame, participants accepted language condemning arrogance, greed and waste when it was in the context of a collective failing and associated with calls to live more simply. To avoid the feeling of powerlessness, it is important to stress that action needs to take place at all levels: personal, collective and governmental.

5. Personal Pledge

Tested language	Climate change is important to me and my faith. I accept this truth and will share it. I will make a commitment to change myself and defend/protect the world.
Narrative arc	I make a public statement of my conviction - through which I reaffirm my faith - to share, lead and teach through the power of my personal belief. By doing so, I help build a world in which others share my values.
Keywords	I believe, accept, commit, teach, share; truth
Application	Language around truth and lifestyle change tested much better with "I" than "we". All faiths contain rituals of personal declaration and commitment. A 'we' based narrative can suggest collective blame and lead people to distance and detach themselves. Personal declarations are more engaging and can reflect different traditions of inspiration and teaching.

Other ideas

New ideas emerged through the research which may have strong potential for campaign messaging and slogans.

Wake up!	The metaphor of sleeping and wakefulness is embodied in parables and stories in all faith traditions and was endorsed by many participants. Calling on people to "wake up" is a non-judgmental way of encouraging participation and could be a strong campaign slogan.
Global warning!	The language of climate change as a warning that we have "strayed from the path" scored well and is less judgmental than blame messaging.
Journey	The language of paths, journeys, and (sometimes) steps appears across all faith traditions and came up regularly in the discussions. Like faith, our engagement with climate change is a journey from ignorance to knowledge and from silence to action. Climate change narratives could draw on these powerful associations.
Inaction is also an action	All faiths, especially Judaism and Buddhism, have a deep understanding that inaction can also be an immoral act. This is directly relevant to climate change, which is not the result of deliberate intention to cause harm but rather a failure to respond to clear warnings.
Connectedness	All faiths have a strong sense of interconnectedness between humans, the natural world and the divine, and with past and future generations. Climate change can be considered a form of disconnect. The narrative resolution is that through action we can strengthen our connections with our faith, our community, other people of faith and all of humanity.
Marks of identity	All faiths have visible marks of belonging - in dress, decoration and/or body marking. There may be some form of identification that could work across faiths, such as a wristband or necklace that could represent global interfaith commitment to climate change.

Language to avoid or use carefully

The following language was strongly rejected by some participants. This does not mean that it should never be used - in fact, it may score highly with some audiences - but clearly it does not work across all groups and needs to be used with caution.

Justice	Although commonly used in statements about 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 <i>fairness</i> .
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 <i>limit human</i> desires for ethical reasons.
Signs and tests	Although most of the faiths have language concerning signs and tests, none of the groups liked it being applied to climate change. It is better to talk about <i>warnings</i> .
Disobedience	This word is very polarising. Some thought it entirely appropriate, others rejected it. In general, people felt climate change emerges from ignorance rather than direct willfulness, and that therefore people are not directly breaking moral laws or being 'disobedient'.
Proselytising	Most faiths are wary about conversions and recruitment. Language about building movements needs to be about expanding networks within one's faith rather than recruiting new members.
Religion	Nobody liked the words religion or religious, which were regarded as technical. Participants made the point that they belong to a <i>faith</i> and identify with other <i>people of faith</i> .
Forgiveness	Few participants accepted that climate change was an issue for personal or collective forgiveness, or, even if it was, that they had a right to offer it.

The Climate Outreach and Information Network (COIN) is a non-partisan Oxford-based charity and Europe's leading climate change communication specialists, with 10 years of experience widening and broadening public engagement with climate change. We help our partners 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 organisations including national governments, local government, charities, faith organisations and many others.

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