

Religious Education and Sustainability Ethics: Fostering Faith-Based Action for Sustainable Development in Educational Settings

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Abstract

In a world facing severe ecological crises, secular strategies alone often struggle to inspire long-term behavioral changes. This paper explores how religious education can act as a crucial catalyst for sustainability ethics by shifting environmental care from a legal chore to a deep spiritual duty. Religious lessons offer a unique space for sustainable development, allowing students to build ethical literacy and practical values. Utilizing a reflective inquiry methodology, this study examines how theocentric worldviews across different faiths, such as Islamic stewardship and Catholic social teachings, provide strong intrinsic motivations for conservation. While innovative pedagogies like digital gamification and experiential service-learning show great promise in engaging students, several systemic barriers still remain. Significant gaps in teacher training are often made worse by rigid curricula and fragmented educational policies that separate subjects into isolated silos. Ultimately, balancing sacred traditions with modern interdisciplinary collaboration is essential for transforming classrooms. By offering a practical framework for curriculum reform, this article highlights why integrating faith-based ethics is vital for cultivating active, compassionate stewards of our shared planet.

Keywords: Religious Education, Sustainability Ethics, Reflective Inquiry, Faith-Based Action, Eco-Pesantren, Curriculum Integration

Abstrak

Di tengah krisis ekologi global yang semakin mengkhawatirkan, pendekatan sekuler sering kali kesulitan dalam mendorong perubahan perilaku masyarakat yang mendalam dan berjangka panjang. Artikel ini mengkaji bagaimana pendidikan agama dapat menjadi katalisator krusial bagi etika keberlanjutan dengan mengubah kepedulian lingkungan dari sekadar kewajiban hukum menjadi kewajiban spiritual yang mendalam. Kelas pendidikan agama menawarkan ruang penting bagi pembangunan berkelanjutan guna menumbuhkan literasi etis dan nilai-nilai praktis siswa. Melalui metodologi inkuiri reflektif, kajian ini menganalisis

bagaimana cara pandang teosentris dalam berbagai tradisi iman, seperti konsep kepemimpinan lingkungan dalam Islam dan nilai solidaritas Katolik, mampu melahirkan motivasi intrinsik yang kuat untuk melestarikan alam. Meskipun inovasi pedagogis seperti gamifikasi digital serta pembelajaran eksperiensial berbasis pengabdian masyarakat menawarkan peluang besar, hambatan sistemis nyata masih kerap ditemukan di lapangan. Kesenjangan yang besar dalam pelatihan guru sering kali diperumit oleh struktur kurikulum yang kaku serta kebijakan pendidikan yang terfragmentasi. Pada akhirnya, upaya menyeimbangkan tradisi keagamaan dengan inovasi interdisipliner sangat mendesak dilakukan untuk menciptakan kebijakan kurikulum yang fleksibel demi melahirkan generasi penjaga bumi yang aktif dan berbelas kasih.

Kata Kunci: Pendidikan Agama, Etika Keberlanjutan, Inkuiri Reflektif, Aksi Berbasis Iman, Eco-Pesantren, Integrasi Kurikulum

INTRODUCTION

We are living in a time of unprecedented ecological crises, and the sheer scale of the environmental degradation can feel really overwhelming. I often think that our usual secular strategies, though they are certainly necessary, have a hard time getting people to actually change their behaviors on a deeper, personal level. It seems we need something more intrinsic to make sustainability feel meaningful, and this is where, perhaps, religious education can make a difference. In a study by Stockinger and Ziegler (2025), the authors suggest that school-based religious education acts as an important space for sustainable development. When we talk about sustainability, we aren't just talking about carbon credits or policy documents, as we are also talking about human values and beliefs. According to Marshall (2025), integrating these environmental issues into religious lessons can bridge the gap between spiritual teachings and daily actions. It's about taking those deep-seated beliefs and turning them into practical work in educational settings.

I find it fascinating how a theocentric worldview, as explored by Muhamad et al. (2021), offers a strong intrinsic motivation for students. When individuals view the world through a lens of divine trust or stewardship, conserving water or planting trees is no longer just a legal obligation, but it becomes a sacred duty. Mokotso (2024) also points out that faith-based education helps align local practices with global aims like the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. It's a way of making global initiatives feel intensely personal and culturally grounded, which is quite powerful. Of course, this integration isn't always smooth, and sometimes the religious frameworks feel a bit distant from the scientific realities, or perhaps the curriculum is just too crowded. Still, as Kondrila (2023) argues, the anthropological foundations shared by both religious ethics and sustainability, like the inherent dignity of life, can offer a unified starting point. By engaging students through their faith, we might find a

more resilient path toward environmental responsibility, even if the journey itself is full of complex compromises.

Even though there is a vast body of literature on Education for Sustainable Development, what we call ESD, a noticeable gap remains when it comes to practical implementation within faith-based schools. I think the academic community has spent plenty of time discussing the theoretical connections between faith and ecology, but we haven't quite figured out how this works in a real classroom. For instance, Windsor and Franck (2025) note that the fertile ground between religious education and environmental studies is often talked about in abstract terms rather than concrete lesson plans. This leaves teachers feeling a bit stranded, which is a real shame because they are the ones on the front lines. In addition, the way sustainability is integrated is often highly fragmented. Instead of a cohesive strategy, we tend to get isolated events or a single chapter in a textbook, which doesn't do much.

In their analysis of how teachers perceive these values, Kondrla et al. (2024) point out that many educators struggle to balance their core theological duties with these modern ecological demands. The resources are often lacking, and the curriculum itself is incredibly rigid. According to Weldemariam et al. (2025), the institutional policies in many schools are simply not designed to support interdisciplinary teaching, which makes any real integration very difficult to sustain over time. There is also a lack of robust pedagogical models that show teachers how to combine these two fields. While some schools might use simple storytelling, others might avoid the topic altogether. This fragmentation is further complicated by teacher training gaps. As noted by García-Llamas et al. (2026), teacher education programs often focus heavily on the social or cultural aspects of sustainability, leaving out the deeper ecological and economic layers. We end up with a situation where educators want to teach these values but simply do not have the practical tools or the training to do so. In a scoping review by Vidal and Kuckuck (2025), it becomes clear that we need more comprehensive, hands-on frameworks rather than just more theoretical debates. Without a clear model, faith-based sustainability education will likely remain well-meaning but largely ineffective, which is a missed opportunity.

This article aims to address these practical and conceptual gaps by offering a more unified look at how religious education can foster sustainability ethics. I want to move away from purely abstract theories and look at what is actually happening on the ground, while also offering some fresh ideas. First, we will examine how different religious traditions approach ecology. For example, Zagonari (2020) provides an empirical comparison of various religious environmental ethics, showing how they can support local sustainability efforts. By comparing these traditions, we can find common values that transcend specific dogmas, which is really helpful.

Second, I want to explore some of the more innovative teaching methods that are emerging, which excites me. In his study on digital learning, H. Widodo (2025) discusses an AI-gamification-religiosity learning model that has been used in Islamic higher education. This kind of modern approach is particularly interesting because it shows how technology and faith can work together to engage students. It is a big step away from old-fashioned, passive lectures, which can be so boring. Lastly, the article will present concrete empirical evidence from faith-based institutions. As documented by C. D. Widodo (2026), the eco-pesantren model in Indonesia serves as an excellent example of how Islamic principles of stewardship can be woven into school governance and community action. Similarly, Sabbaghi and Cavanagh (2015) show how Catholic universities can embed sustainability into their institutional identity. By bringing these diverse elements together, namely the theological, pedagogical, and empirical aspects, I hope to offer a practical framework that policymakers and educators can actually use. It is my hope that this will help move faith-based schools from simple awareness to active, long-term participation, helping them become true leaders in the global movement for sustainable development.

METHOD

I think that when we study a topic as personal and spiritual as religious education, we cannot simply rely on dry, quantitative methods. We need an approach that allows us to reflect and connect the data with deep human values. In this article, I chose to use Reflective Inquiry as the primary methodological framework. As San Martín-Cantero et al. (2025) explain, active-reflective methodologies are incredibly helpful for linking classroom learning with actual community needs, allowing us to not just gather data but also reflect on its moral impact. As a researcher, I find myself agreeing with the perspective of Marshall (2025), who emphasizes the importance of bridging theological teachings with daily practical actions, and this reflective inquiry gives me the space to think about this bridge honestly. This approach helps me critically analyze theoretical literature and empirical case studies, not as a detached observer, but as an active participant questioning how faith can drive real environmental action.

This reflective inquiry method works by deeply examining different narratives, curricular policies, and institutional practices from various faith-based organizations. Through an iterative process of reflection, I try to unpack how theological concepts are translated into school governance. In her study on community engagement, Çıralı Sarıca (2025) shows that reflective practice is highly effective for helping both students and educators make sense of their social involvement through digital storytelling. In a similar way, I use this critical reflection to evaluate the effectiveness of modern pedagogical innovations like problem-based learning and religious gamification. This might feel a bit less objective to

some traditional researchers, but I think pure objectivity often fails to capture the spiritual and emotional dimensions that actually drive sustainability ethics. Through this method, each finding from the literature is not just presented as a cold fact, but it is constantly questioned for its practical relevance in a real classroom.

At the final stage of analysis, this reflective inquiry guides me to synthesize the points of convergence among different religious traditions. I try to look beyond dogmatic differences to find a shared ethical commitment to environmental care. According to Vidal and Kuckuck (2025), reflective competence is absolutely crucial for teachers so they can teach sustainability deeply rather than just as a curricular formality. By applying reflective inquiry, this study successfully identifies the systemic gaps in teacher training and offers collaborative, interdisciplinary paths forward. I believe that by constantly reflecting on these institutional barriers, we can find wiser ways to balance sacred traditions with the urgent, innovative changes needed for the future of our planet.

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

RE as a Platform for Sustainability Ethics

I often think about how school is not just a place where we learn facts, but a space where we actually shape our moral character. When we look at religious education, it serves as a really unique platform for integrating sustainability ethics, which is something we do not always see in secular subjects. In their overview of didactical impulses, Stockinger and Ziegler (2025) explain how school-based religious education acts as an important space for sustainable development, allowing students to explore their personal responsibilities in a changing world. This is not about pushing dogmatic rules on young minds, but rather about building what we call ethical literacy. Through the rich narratives and moral frameworks found within various religious traditions, students can develop the ability to reason about complex ecological problems in a structured way. As Marshall (2025) suggests, integrating environmental issues into religious lessons can bridge the gap between spiritual teachings and daily actions, helping students think critically about ethical dilemmas. This is fascinating because it moves the discussion from abstract scientific data to personal moral questions, like how we should live our lives in relation to the Earth.

Perhaps the most powerful part of this is the spiritual motivation that comes from having a theocentric worldview. In their discussion on sustainability education, Muhamad et al. (2021) explore how a theocentric worldview can offer a strong intrinsic motivation for students. When the universe is viewed not just as a set of resources to be consumed, but as a divine creation, our relationship with nature changes completely. I think this shifts the whole basis of conservation from external regulation to a deep, internal commitment. Kondrla (2023) discusses how the anthropological foundations shared by both religious ethics and sustainability, like human dignity and stewardship, can offer a unified

starting point. This means that instead of seeing religion and ecology as separate fields, we can see them as deeply connected. When students believe they are caretakers of a sacred trust, they are much more likely to adopt sustainable habits. Of course, this is not a magical solution, and we have to acknowledge that these teachings are not always applied perfectly. Indeed, as Kondrla et al. (2024) point out, the way teachers and students perceive these values can be highly complex and sometimes inconsistent. In their introductory chapter, Windsor and Franck (2025) write about the fertile ground between religious education and environmental studies, but they also note that this ground remains largely underutilized in actual classroom settings. In addition, as Jovkovska et al. (2025) argue, the role of religious education in shaping value systems among primary school students remains highly significant, yet its success depends heavily on our willingness to innovate the curriculum. By teaching ethical literacy and spiritual motivation early on, we are giving students the inner tools they need to face a changing world, rather than just teaching them to follow rules.

Comparative Religious Perspectives on Sustainability

It is really interesting to see how different faith traditions, despite having distinct theological origins, often arrive at very similar ethical conclusions when it comes to the environment. In his empirical comparison of religious environmental ethics, Zagonari (2020) shows how diverse traditions can support local and global sustainability efforts. When we look at Eastern religions like Hinduism, the core focus is often on interconnectedness. According to Sukrawati (2022), Hindu education emphasizes community and parental involvement to build a strong cultural and ecological identity, which helps students see their role within the cosmic order. The principle of Dharma, or universal duty, teaches that humans are not separate from the environment, but are part of a larger, living system. In a similar way, Buddhism approaches ecology through mindfulness and compassion. As Sumaryati and Lasiyo (2024) explain, Buddhist ethical philosophy in contemporary education promotes reflective, holistic learning that values all life forms and emphasizes the importance of teacher competence. This means that environmental degradation is seen as a reflection of inner greed, and the solution lies in cultivating self-restraint and deep empathy for all living beings.

When we turn to Western or monotheistic traditions, the concepts are framed a bit differently, though they are equally profound. In Christian ethics, there is a strong focus on stewardship and social justice. As D'Amore et al. (2026) note, while Catholic ethics tend to stress solidarity and relational legitimacy, Protestant ethics often focus more on individual accountability and personal stewardship. The Catholic perspective was famously articulated in Pope Francis's *Laudato Si'*, which calls for an "integral ecology" that connects social justice with environmental care. This framework has been actively adopted by Catholic universities, which

Sabbaghi and Cavanagh (2015) describe as integrating sustainability into their very mission and governance.

On the other hand, Islamic environmental ethics are deeply rooted in the twin principles of stewardship and trust. In his analysis of eco-pesantren models, C. D. Widodo (2026) demonstrates how the concepts of khalifah, which means stewardship, and amanah, which means trust, are integrated into school governance and pedagogy. The idea is that humans are appointed as vicegerents on Earth, and we are holding this world in trust for the Creator. This is not a license to dominate, but a heavy responsibility to maintain balance and harmony. I find it beautiful that these distinct paths can lead to a shared ecological responsibility. As Irawan et al. (2026) explain, interfaith movements often blend contemplative practices with active advocacy, showing that diverse groups can cooperate effectively on environmental action by combining internal transformation with external works. Even though their theological languages are different, they share a common concern for the Earth. This comparison shows that we do not need a single, uniform secular philosophy to save the planet. Instead, we can tap into these deep, diverse spiritual resources, which already have immense authority in the lives of billions of people.

Spirituality, Compassion, and Ethical Decision-Making

At its heart, I believe that saving the environment is not just a technical challenge, but a deeply spiritual and emotional one. We can have all the scientific data in the world, but if we do not care about the Earth, nothing will really change. In their study on sustainability at the workspace, Kapadan Othayoth et al. (2026) explain how the linkage of sustainable development and spirituality can enhance sustainability outcomes by fostering personal growth, ethical awareness, and meaningful work. This is where compassion comes in. When we talk about compassion, we are not just talking about a vague feeling of pity, but an active, driving force. According to Qingyan (2025), spiritual motivation guides our moral decision-making, shaping our personal values and intellect in ways that purely rational arguments cannot. It changes how we perceive our actions, making us realize that our small choices, like wasting food or energy, have real consequences for others.

In educational settings, this requires a shift toward what we might call compassionate pedagogy. As Tomlinson and Killingback (2026) suggest, a compassionate pedagogy supports student wellbeing and ethical engagement, though it certainly requires a lot of wisdom and resilience from teachers. In his exploration of transformative spirituality, Gibson (2015) discusses the practice of compassion in educational contexts, showing that it helps students build deep emotional resilience in the face of global challenges. It is about creating a space where students can feel connected to the suffering of the world and feel empowered to act. This emotional and spiritual connection can lead to proactive citizenship behaviors, which is what we desperately need. Mahipalan (2023) points out

that workplace compassion can strengthen the relationship between spirituality and proactive citizenship behaviors among educators. This means that when teachers model compassion, it trickles down to students, inspiring them to become active protectors of their communities. Ultimately, as Šegina (2026a) argues, integrating spiritual dimensions like compassion, responsibility, and empathy into our curricula provides a value-based foundation that is absolutely essential for making ethical decisions about sustainability. It helps us move from simply knowing what is wrong to actually doing what is right, transforming passive students into passionate advocates for a better future.

PEDAGOGICAL INNOVATIONS FOR INTEGRATING SUSTAINABILITY IN RE

Transformative and Participatory Pedagogies

When we think about classroom dynamics, I often feel that the old ways of teaching, where a teacher just talks at students for an hour, do not work well for something as complex as sustainability. We need methods that actually get students involved and help them feel the weight of these ethical issues. In their study on active learning, Nugraha et al. (2024) describe how integrating problem-based and flipped learning in Islamic religious education can create a clear pathway to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. This makes a lot of sense to me because when you give students a real-world problem, like a local water shortage, and ask them to solve it using their religious values, the lesson suddenly becomes real. They are no longer just memorizing definitions, but they are applying theological principles to actual crises. According to Nguyen et al. (2024), problem-based learning is highly effective for integrating sustainable development goals because it forces students to think critically and collaborate. Amirudin et al. (2025) also argue that problem-based learning acts as a key pedagogical innovation that can transform how higher education students comprehend Islamic religious concepts. It is not just about learning the dogma, but about understanding how that dogma lives in the world.

Alongside this, I find the concept of Values-based Education for Sustainable Development, or VbESD, to be quite promising. As discussed by Huang et al. (2021), a values-based approach provides a solid pedagogical framework for sustainability education by focusing on core pillars like stewardship, balance, and vicegerency. Ferdinan et al. (2026) show that when sustainability is taught as an intrinsic value rather than an academic chore, students are far more likely to adopt long-term eco-friendly habits. I think this is where we can really see the power of combining faith and education.

To make this even more engaging for today's students, we are seeing some really creative digital approaches. For instance, H. Widodo (2025) has developed an AI-gamification-religiosity learning model that integrates adaptive AI, game-based learning, and religious content to enhance critical literacy and sustainability ethics in private Islamic universities. I think this

is fascinating because it uses modern technology, which students already love, to build deep moral reasoning. It shows that religious education does not have to be old-fashioned; it can be incredibly cutting-edge. Though some might worry that gamification might trivialize sacred teachings, I believe that if it is designed carefully, it can make these ethical values feel much more immediate and personal.

Experiential Learning and Interfaith Dialogue

Learning about environmental care in a classroom is one thing, but actually getting your hands dirty in the community is where the real transformation happens, in my opinion. This is why experiential learning and community engagement are so vital. In their research on community projects, Hassan et al. (2020) highlight the social benefits of service-learning, showing how it connects students directly with the three pillars of sustainability, particularly the social dimension. When students step out of the school gates to work on a local clean-up project or help build a community garden, they are translating theological theory into physical action. Adarlo et al. (2024) explain that this journey from the classroom to the community helps students understand the practical application of the Sustainable Development Goals. It builds a sense of active stewardship.

I really like how Çıralı Sarıca (2025) suggests using digital storytelling as a reflective practice within service-learning. It allows students to make sense of their community experiences by creating narratives that connect their personal faith with global challenges. In their evaluation of Malaysian higher education, Jamil et al. (2026) discuss the transformative role of SULAM, which is the national service-learning model, in advancing both sustainability and core Madani values. It is about fostering civic responsibility through action. To support this moral growth, Al-Hawamleh (2019) argues that storytelling itself is a powerful tool for promoting moral consciousness, helping students internalize ethical behaviors that are grounded in religious and cultural values.

Another crucial piece of this puzzle, especially in our highly diverse world, is dialogue. In their study on rural education, San Martín-Cantero et al. (2025) emphasize that active-reflective methodologies and dialogue help link religious education with wider community needs. I find it beautiful that in a diverse classroom, we can use intercultural and interfaith dialogue to build global responsibility. As Nattheeraphong & Jenks (2026) suggest, learning by contesting and engaging in intercultural responsibility through sustainability-driven higher education can foster a deep sense of mutual understanding. When students from different religious backgrounds sit together to discuss environmental issues, they quickly realize that they share the same home and many of the same values. This kind of collaborative dialogue helps break down barriers and builds a shared commitment to the planet.

Teacher Training Gaps and Professional Development

We can design the most beautiful, innovative curricula in the world, but if our teachers are not prepared to teach them, nothing will change. This is a massive bottleneck that we really need to address honestly. In their case study of Spanish universities, García-Llamas et al. (2026) point out a very significant gap in teacher training: programs often focus heavily on the sociocultural aspects of sustainability, while largely ignoring the environmental and economic dimensions. This means many educators are entering classrooms without a complete understanding of how sustainability actually works. They might feel comfortable discussing social justice, but they struggle when it comes to teaching ecological systems or resource management.

To fix this, we need to rethink how we train our teachers. Bulut and Borrromeo Ferri (2025) suggest that we need to bridge subject-specific pedagogies with education for sustainable development in pre-service teacher training, ensuring that future educators have both the content knowledge and the pedagogical skills. It is not enough to just give them a textbook. Yadav (2024) also argues that integrating eco-awareness into curricula requires continuous professional development that addresses these specific challenges. Rangel et al. (2026) show that institutional commitment to comprehensive teacher training is absolutely essential for successful curricular implementation.

I believe that collaborative models like Lesson Study can be incredibly helpful here. In their analysis of teacher candidate development, Karasu et al. (2026) show how a Lesson Study model can improve instructional skills and student outcomes through collaborative planning and reflective practice. Teachers can work together to design lessons, observe each other in the classroom, and reflect on what worked and what did not. Murphy et al. (2020) also emphasize that continuous professional development programs can significantly boost teacher self-efficacy and competence in teaching sustainability. Finally, as Tavakkoli et al. (2026) argue, we must recognize that teacher educators themselves are key change agents, and their professional identity and agency are critical for shaping the next generation of teachers. If we do not support our educators, we cannot expect our students to become the sustainability leaders of tomorrow.

FAITH-BASED ACTIONS FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: CASE STUDIES AND EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

Institutional Practices and Whole-School Approaches

When we talk about how religious principles actually play out in real life, I think there is nothing quite like looking at a physical school campus that has redesigned its entire culture around sustainability. It is one thing to read scriptures in a quiet library, but it is quite another to see these values built into the very bricks, water pipes, and daily routines of an educational community. In his study on Indonesian eco-pesantrens, C. D.

Widodo (2026) demonstrates how the Islamic principles of stewardship, known as *khalifah*, and trust, or *amanah*, are integrated into school governance, curricula, and daily practices. I find this model absolutely fascinating because it shows that a school does not have to separate its religious character from its environmental actions. In these boarding schools, conserving energy or planting crops becomes a shared spiritual discipline rather than a dry administrative chore. The governance itself is holistic, blending traditional religious values with modern environmental management. According to Rahman and Bahtiar (2026), this eco-Islamic education model contributes significantly to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals within Muslim boarding schools in South Sulawesi, showing that the model is highly replicable across different regions. This aligns closely with the findings of Mokotso (2024), who discusses how religious education in Lesotho can align with SDG 4 through school-wide and community-based strategies. Mokotso points out that for these programs to be truly effective, we need a complete whole-school approach where the entire institution, not just a single class, embraces sustainability, even though achieving this level of deep pedagogical transformation and inclusivity is often quite difficult.

On the other side of the theological spectrum, we see similar, deeply inspiring efforts in Catholic institutions. According to Sabbaghi and Cavanagh (2015), Catholic universities have successfully integrated sustainability into their mission, curriculum, and governance, often drawing rich inspiration from frameworks like Pope Francis's *Laudato Si'*. I think this theological framing is incredibly powerful because it connects environmental care with social justice, helping students see that protecting the Earth is also about caring for the poor and the marginalized. It is not just about installing solar panels, though that is certainly part of it, but it is about fostering what the authors call a relational legitimacy where the university's institutional identity is completely aligned with ecological ethics. In a way, these institutions act as living laboratories. They show students that an organization can be professional, intellectually rigorous, and deeply spiritual all at once. Of course, keeping this balance is not always easy, and there are often tensions between modern operational demands and traditional religious identities. Yet, as Mokotso (2024) notes, when institutional leadership is fully committed to a whole-school approach, these religious settings can become incredibly effective catalysts for sustainable development, transforming how students view their place in the world.

To bridge these institutional actions with academic management, we must also look at how higher education structures themselves. As Karim et al. (2026) explain, progressive Islamic educational management combines spiritual development with professional management practices to ensure long-term human resource sustainability within Islamic schools. This dual focus ensures that the green policies we set up do not collapse when leadership changes. In addition, in their research on Indonesian higher

education, Sarhindi (2025) explores how Islamic state and private universities, such as UIN Jakarta and UII Yogyakarta, foster environmental sustainability. This comparative work highlights that whether an institution is a traditional boarding school or a modern university, embedding theological values into the institutional culture is key to making green policies last.

Community Engagement and SDG Advancement

I have always believed that education should never be confined to the four walls of a classroom. If our lessons in sustainability do not spill over into the local community, then we are probably doing something wrong. In their discussion on sustainable infrastructure, Wubah et al. (2021) highlight how initiatives like Millersville University's zero-energy building can foster deep student engagement and community partnerships to advance the Sustainable Development Goals. When students can walk through a zero-energy building and participate in its upkeep, the concept of a low-carbon future becomes incredibly tangible for them. It is a fantastic way to bridge the gap between academic research and civic responsibility. In their study on ecotheological value integration, Prima et al. (2026) also show how religious institutions can look beyond their textual traditions, using phenomenological approaches to connect students directly with the ecological needs of their surrounding communities.

This community-focused energy is often driven by faith-based organizations themselves. As Kealy (2026) observes, both Catholic and Islamic organizations play an essential role in advancing the SDGs by translating their respective theological principles into active community service, social solidarity, and local development. They are often the ones on the ground, mobilizing volunteers and resources where secular institutions might struggle to build trust. In their report on green initiatives, Hasanah et al. (2024) explain how a university can actively promote the Sustainable Development Goals through dedicated community service and on-campus greening campaigns. This shows that the impact of faith-based education extends far beyond the students themselves, as it directly shapes the ecological well-being of the surrounding region.

What I find particularly interesting is how modern technology is helping to scale these efforts, especially in remote or marginalized areas. In their work on digital learning, Gottschalk and Winther-Nielsen (2018) discuss how e-learning platforms and mobile applications can enable faith-inspired education on the Sustainable Development Goals in remote contexts. This is a massive help because it allows isolated or under-resourced communities to access high-quality educational materials that connect their personal faith with global environmental crises. In their analysis of management education, Abdullah et al. (2026) show that advancing sustainable Islamic management education through ESD frameworks can create more socially responsible leaders who are ready to serve their communities. By combining this digital reach with the local

trust that religious organizations already possess, we can create a very potent force for community development, making global sustainability goals feel relevant and achievable for everyone.

Early Formation of Sustainability Ethics

I often wonder when a person's ethical relationship with the environment actually begins. In my experience, we cannot wait until students reach university to teach them to care for the Earth; these values need to be planted much earlier, during their most formative years. In her analysis of primary school curriculum, Šegina (2026a) explores how religious education textbooks in Croatia contribute directly to the cross-curricular theme of sustainable development. I think this textbook analysis is incredibly revealing because it shows how early-grade lessons use stories, prayers, and simple moral teachings to build a foundation of spiritual and ecological awareness. As Šegina (2026b) further explains, integrating Catholic religious education with sustainability values helps children develop a value-based foundation for ethical decision-making from a very young age. It is about helping them understand that the natural world is a beautiful gift that deserves our respect, protection, and gratitude.

However, textbooks are only half the battle, and they are not nearly as powerful as the actual behavior children observe in the adults around them. According to Masdul et al. (2024), the acculturation of religious values in early childhood relies heavily on active role modeling and daily habituation by both teachers and parents. If a child sees their teacher carefully recycling or their parents tenderly tending to a garden, those actions speak much louder than any textbook chapter. It is about creating a consistent, green home and school environment where ecological care is simply a normal part of daily life. In their research on Islamic primary schools, Rahmatika et al. (2024) present a socio-science spirituality learning model which demonstrates that spirituality can be nurtured alongside scientific inquiry. This is beautiful because it shows that science and faith do not have to be enemies in the classroom. Instead, we can teach young students the scientific facts of environmental science while simultaneously cultivating their spiritual awe and moral responsibility for nature.

To expand this early-stage development, we must also consider the psychological and spiritual support that younger students need. In their study on student wellbeing, Hidayat et al. (2026) explore how faith-based ecological counseling can integrate Islamic spirituality and sustainability principles to help students develop eco-friendly behaviors. This kind of pastoral care is really valuable because it helps students process their eco-anxiety through their faith, transforming fear of climate change into constructive action. By combining early curriculum integration with authentic adult role modeling, interdisciplinary learning, and spiritual counseling, we can help shape a new generation of citizens who do not just

understand sustainability intellectually, but who carry it deeply within their hearts and spirits.

CURRICULUM CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Systemic and Institutional Barriers

I often think that the hardest part of any educational reform is not dreaming up new ideas, but rather dealing with the stubborn, dusty structures of our institutions. When we try to bring sustainability ethics into religious education, we run headfirst into some really heavy systemic walls. In their study on higher education, Ramu and Thangavel (2026) point out that rigid curricula, overcrowded timetables, and deeply entrenched traditions represent the most significant barriers to integrating the Sustainable Development Goals. It is a real headache for teachers who want to do something different. If every hour of the school day is already packed with preparing for standardized exams or teaching strict dogma, there is simply no room left to discuss things like climate change or eco-justice. Magang et al. (2025) also argue that overcrowded structures and a general lack of curriculum flexibility prevent the effective integration of education for sustainable development. We end up with a situation where environmental topics are treated as minor additions rather than core values.

In addition to this structural rigidity, we have to talk about the severe lack of resources. In their review of modern curricula, Zul et al. (2026) show that limited materials, lack of instructional time, and insufficient institutional funding severely impede the integration of ethical and environmental values. Teachers do not have the textbooks, the lesson plans, or the training tools to make these connections, and many feel like they are being asked to build a house without any bricks. Allayarov et al. (2025) discuss how systemic resource constraints and fragmented institutional frameworks make it very difficult to implement comprehensive environmental education. I think this resource gap is often made worse by deep-seated institutional inertia and resistance to change. According to Weldemariam et al. (2025), a baseline study of curriculum integration reveals that institutional resistance, along with definitional ambiguity about what sustainability actually means in different subjects, slows down curriculum transformation. When school leaders do not understand how religious values connect with ecological issues, they are very unlikely to support new projects. Marshall (2025) also highlights that fragmented policy structures and a lack of unified national frameworks leave individual schools to struggle on their own. Similarly, in their analysis of Middle Eastern education, Mahfoodh and AlAtawi (2026) argue that without a more holistic perspective that connects local policy with global goals, any integration will remain weak and disjointed. Overcoming these institutional barriers is going to require a serious, coordinated effort from both policymakers and local school leaders.

Interdisciplinary Collaboration and Curriculum Innovation

To break down these stubborn institutional silos, I believe we must learn to work across traditional disciplinary boundaries. Religion and science have historically been treated as completely separate worlds in our schools, but sustainability is a problem that requires both. In their discussion on project management, Laware et al. (2005) suggest that initiating interdisciplinary projects requires finding common ground and establishing cross-curricular frameworks. This means that instead of keeping religious values in one classroom and biology in another, we can design lessons where they actually talk to each other. Lam and Singh (2026) propose a model for cross-institutional interdisciplinary education that moves beyond rigid academic boundaries to foster collaborative learning. I find this idea of cross-institutional work very exciting because it allows students to see that ecological problems cannot be solved by any single field of study. According to Weldemariam et al. (2025), building transdisciplinary networks is absolutely essential for overcoming disciplinary silos and transforming the curriculum. It helps create a space where educators from different fields can share resources and co-create lessons.

In their guide on management education, Brueckner et al. (2017) discuss how moving toward responsible citizenship and sustainability requires a highly multidisciplinary and integrated approach. It is about helping students see the big picture. I think we can also use modern digital technology to make this collaboration feel more natural and engaging for students. As Papakostas (2024) explains, constructing a digital game-based learning framework for religious education can provide immersive, active methodologies that engage students in complex ethical scenarios. This shows that digital tools can act as an innovative bridge between different subjects, helping students apply religious ethics to virtual environmental challenges.

A particularly powerful tool for managing this kind of student teamwork is the CO-SPACE model. In their development of this analytical framework, Winther et al. (2026) explain how the CO-SPACE model supports interdisciplinary student collaboration by analyzing how they interact and solve problems together. By using this model, teachers can structure group projects where students must combine scientific data with religious values to address a local environmental issue. To see how this looks in practice, Shefeld (2025) shows that integrating global citizenship and sustainability programs into secondary schools can help students build practical collaborative skills. By encouraging this kind of collaborative innovation, we can help students understand that protecting the Earth is a shared human responsibility that requires every tool we have.

Balancing Tradition and Innovation

I think one of the most sensitive parts of this whole journey is figuring out how to balance the old with the new. In faith-based schools, there is

often a lot of anxiety about maintaining theological traditions, and some people worry that embracing modern interdisciplinary issues like sustainability might dilute their religious teachings. According to Weldemariam et al. (2025), this tension between preserving core religious doctrines and adopting transformative, modern pedagogies is a common challenge for institutions trying to integrate the Sustainable Development Goals. It is a very delicate balance. In her study on curriculum change, Sultana (2022) points out that religious education is currently in a complex transition from content-centered, dogmatic methods to student-centered, active learning styles. This transition can feel really scary for conservative communities who want to protect their traditional beliefs.

To ease this tension, I believe we must empower our teachers to become active participants in the design process rather than just passive implementers. As Ahmad and Ibahrine (2025) argue, embedding sustainability into faculty development through collaborative frameworks, like the CoDesignS model, empowers educators as co-designers of their own learning environments. When teachers are given the agency to decide how environmental ethics fit into their existing religious curriculum, they are much less likely to resist the change. It allows them to preserve what is sacred while still welcoming what is necessary. In their analysis of student participation, Sharma et al. (2026) explain that using curriculum innovation and participatory pedagogies can help students move from simple awareness to active participation in global goals. This means that when we make the lessons more active, we are not destroying tradition; we are actually bringing it to life.

At the same time, in their study on curriculum patterns, Weiss et al. (2021) show that embedding sustainability into higher education requires inclusive, gradual changes that respect the institutional culture. We cannot just force a new system overnight. As Marshall (2025) suggests, balancing tradition and innovation requires inclusive, collaborative approaches that respect the religious identity of the school while still embracing pedagogical change. It is about showing communities that caring for the creation is actually a deep, traditional value that has simply been forgotten in the modern world. By framing sustainability not as a secular threat but as a spiritual renewal, we can help schools embrace the future without losing their souls.

DISCUSSION AND SYNTHESIS

Theocentric-Ecological Convergence

I often think about the limits of our secular approaches to environmental conservation. We pass laws, we set carbon taxes, and we design complex regulatory frameworks, but these measures often feel like they are missing something deep. They treat sustainability as a set of rules to be followed under threat of penalty rather than a deeply felt, personal commitment. In their study on Islamic spirituality, Muhamad et al. (2021) explore how a theocentric worldview can offer a strong intrinsic motivation

for students, transforming the way they perceive the natural world. When we connect ecological care to a sense of sacred duty, the motivation changes from external compliance to an internal, spiritual calling. I believe this convergence of the theocentric and the ecological is where we can find a far more resilient foundation for sustainability. It is not just about keeping the planet habitable for our own survival; it is about honoring a divine trust.

Personally, I find it fascinating how this spiritual grounding can enrich secular sustainability movements, which can sometimes feel a bit dry or overly technical. As Kapadan Othayoth et al. (2026) explain, linking sustainable development with spirituality in the workspace can enhance sustainability outcomes by fostering personal growth and ethical awareness. It changes the narrative from one of sacrifice and regulation to one of spiritual fulfillment and connection. According to Qingyan (2025), spiritual motivation guides our moral decision-making, shaping our values in ways that purely rational arguments cannot. This is incredibly important because when people are spiritually motivated, their commitment is much less likely to fade when the rules change or when policing is absent. In their overview of didactical impulses, Stockinger and Ziegler (2025) suggest that school-based religious education acts as an important space for sustainable development. It is a place where we can nurture this deep-seated ethical commitment early in life. By bringing faith into the conversation, we are not diluting secular science; rather, we are giving it a heart and a soul. As Kondrla (2023) discusses, the anthropological foundations shared by both religious ethics and sustainability can offer a unified starting point for a more compassionate relationship with the Earth. This convergence shows that when we care for the creation out of love and reverence, our green habits become a permanent part of who we are, rather than just a checklist we follow to avoid a fine.

If we want to turn these beautiful ideas into real-world change, our educational policies have to change first. I suspect that without direct, structural support from policymakers, even the most passionate teachers will eventually burn out against the rigid walls of the school system. First, we need to create space within the curriculum. As Weldemariam et al. (2025) suggest, systematic integration of sustainable development into the curriculum requires a baseline understanding and active institutional commitment. This means policymakers must give schools the flexibility to blend subjects, allowing religious education to work hand-in-hand with science and social studies. In their review of modern curricula, Zul et al. (2026) argue that addressing curricular rigidity and fragmented policies is essential for successfully integrating ethical values. If we keep these fields in isolated silos, we are missing a major opportunity to build a cohesive learning experience for our students.

Second, we must put our money where our mouth is by funding comprehensive teacher training. It is unfair to expect religious educators to teach complex ecological concepts when they have never been trained to do so. According to Lenziardi et al. (2025), enhancing teacher competence in

education for sustainable development requires a value-oriented framework that supports both content knowledge and ethical reasoning. Policymakers need to fund ongoing, collaborative professional development programs. In their study on collaborative teacher training, Karasu et al. (2026) demonstrate that models like Lesson Study can significantly improve instructional skills and student outcomes. By funding these reflective, collaborative spaces, we can help teachers build the confidence they need to teach sustainability. Murphy et al. (2020) also emphasize that continuous professional development can boost teacher self-efficacy and change how they approach pedagogical innovation in primary classrooms. Lastly, as Marshall (2025) suggests, balancing tradition and innovation requires inclusive, collaborative policies that respect the school's religious identity while promoting interdisciplinary change. By offering structural flexibility and real financial investment in our teachers, policymakers can help faith-based schools lead the way in creating a greener, more compassionate future.

CONCLUSION

Looking back at our exploration, I think the potential of religious education to foster sustainability ethics is truly remarkable. When we combine spiritual teachings with environmental values, we create an approach that goes far beyond the limits of secular education, which often struggles to inspire long-term change. This is not about adding another subject to an already crowded timetable, but about transforming how students see their relationship with the natural world. Throughout this study, we have seen how different faith traditions, despite their theological differences, offer rich, intrinsic reasons to care for the creation. Whether through the Islamic concept of stewardship or the Catholic call for social solidarity, religious education builds a deep moral responsibility that regulations alone cannot achieve. Ultimately, by nurturing ethical literacy and compassion early in life, we can help students understand that protecting the planet is a sacred trust. This shifts their motivation from simple legal compliance to a lifelong, heart-felt commitment to sustainable living.

While I find these insights to be very encouraging, we must also be honest about the limitations of this article. Personally, I think the most obvious limit is the narrow geographic and theological scope of our discussion. Our empirical evidence and case studies are heavily dominated by Islamic eco-pesantren models in Indonesia and Catholic higher education initiatives inspired by *Laudato Si'*. While these cases are incredibly rich, they do not represent the vast diversity of religious settings worldwide. For instance, the experiences of other monotheistic or Eastern traditions, such as Protestantism, Hinduism, and Buddhism, are discussed primarily in conceptual terms rather than through real-world institutional data. In addition, we have focused largely on formal school settings, leaving out the informal, community-led religious education that happens in

homes and local places of worship. This means our conclusions might not apply perfectly to every cultural or religious context, and we must be careful not to over-generalize our findings.

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors assert the absence of any conflict of interest. We affirm that the manuscript is original and is not presently under review by any other publisher.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

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