



Kristian Noll

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## How faith communities can restore trust in climate policy

*People in Britain are losing interest in climate change and trust in politicians to tackle it. Faith communities can help change that, argues Kristian Noll.*



The climate crisis represents paradoxical political challenge aptly demonstrated by two global trends. First, despite the **overwhelming scientific consensus** that human-induced climate change is happening and requires **urgent** responses, political action to address the crisis remains **elusive** and **inadequate**. Second, even though **concern** about the climate emergency remains high, **fewer people** say they are willing to take personal action to address climate challenges.

We also see these trends reflected in Britain: the number of adults who say the environment is an important political issue fell by over **10 percentage points** in the last year, more people report being **“unworried”** about the crisis, and **misunderstanding** about the nature of the crisis and its potential solutions abounds **among policymakers**. It should not be surprising that prominent **institutions**, politicians, and commentators in Britain have called for a reset in our approach to climate change – or even **abandoned** climate goals altogether.

These trends reflect a deeper crisis of broken trust between policymakers and the public. Indeed, **public trust** in the ability of government to adequately respond to the climate crisis is low (**especially** in the UK), and reports indicate that there are consistently **discrepancies** between what British MPs *think* their constituents want, and what constituents *actually* desire.

The urgent task of addressing the climate crisis must therefore be coupled with rebuilding trust between citizens and public officials. Accomplishing this will necessitate a different approach to

our politics, one which prioritises new methods of engagement and which incorporates new constituencies in political debate.



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At the **LSE Religion and Global Society unit**, our research and impact work has focused on bridging this communication gap between policymakers and the constituents most impacted by climate effects. Drawing on our research insights from **international ethnographic** fieldwork in Egypt and Jordan and **our local engagement** with London Councils, our unit has learned that engaging faith-based constituencies is particularly impactful.

## Why engage faith communities in climate discussions?

First, while Britain is certainly less religious than it was in the past, faith remains an important factor in British public life. The 2021 **ONS Census** revealed that 56 per cent of people in England and Wales say they belong to a religious or faith tradition (and this number increases in certain localities, with 66 per cent of Londoners belonging to a religious tradition, for instance). In an era where finding any point of political agreement proves challenging, having a common point of reference for constituents could prove transformative.

Second, faith communities have a long history of contributing to British society through **economic** and **social** means, but also by partnering with the Government in times of crisis including during the **COVID-19 pandemic**. Recognising this previous engagement — and in accordance with the Government's **decentralisation** agenda — many local authorities (such as the Greater London Authority) have prioritised “meeting regularly with senior faith leaders” and working to ensure “all faiths are involved” in policymaking. As of yet, however, this engagement has not extended to the issue of the climate crisis, despite the centrality of this issue to these policymaking bodies.

Third, faith communities have a very practical role to play in addressing the climate crisis, including through their management of material assets. Globally, religious groups are the third-largest

economic power on Earth, managing around 10 per cent of global financial assets. This leverage is also evidenced in the UK where, for instance, the Church of England manages **an estimated £11.1 bn** in investments, **over 150,000 acres** of land, and **thousands** of buildings and nearly **£1.5 bn** is held by 1,880 mosques nationwide.



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Fourth, religious language provides a new way of talking about the climate crisis and a powerful language for communicating the moral imperative of climate action to a broad and diverse constituency. Religious narratives **grounds morality** in a concrete vision for practical impact, often with institutional credibility and assets to support its implementation. Moreover, faith gatherings provide an opportunity for cross-sectoral engagement in a way other spaces cannot, where individuals from diverse backgrounds can come together for a common purpose.

## How can this engagement happen?

Engaging with faith communities may feel uncomfortable, especially for public sector employees who may feel unable to engage in the theological language used within these communities. This hesitancy is understandable, but in a time where the need to rebuild trust in government is urgent, new strategies for communication are necessary. Through **“Faith in Local Climate Policy”**, the LSE RGS unit has been developing a model for engaging faith communities more impactfully in local environmental decision making. Drawing on insights from this project, I offer the following considerations for convening these encounters:

First, some members of faith communities may not be immediately willing to engage with technical terms such as “net zero” or “climate change”. This should not, however, be taken as a sign of apathy or an unwillingness to engage in discussions about the consequences of the climate crisis. On the contrary, it is an opportunity to rethink how we communicate about the crisis. Our work has found that allowing faith-based narratives in policy discussions is a worthwhile exercise and can increase engagement.

Second, it is important to prioritise bottom-up engagement centring the voices and perspectives of those in the room rather than those presenting. Faith communities do not want to be lectured to or treated as communicators of government agendas. Rather, they should be engaged with as leaders with impactful narratives and strategies which complement policy. Centring encounters on facilitated small group discussions is one effective way of achieving this.

Third, it is important to go beyond faith leaders. In certain cases, including faith leaders in political and community gatherings can legitimise convening, but in other traditions, top-down hierarchies might be viewed with suspicion. Sometimes, bringing midranking leaders and congregants into discussion have more of an impact than high-level leaders.

Rebuilding consensus and trust in the process of policymaking requires new strategies to connect policy to people. In this worthy endeavour, religion should not be viewed as an impediment to science or politics. On the contrary, perhaps it's the key to restoring trust and uniting sectors across difference to advance true sustainability.

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## About the author

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