

# What do different religions believe about how we should treat the

# ENVIRONMENT?

## BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE FOR THE TEACHER

FOR YOUR EYES ONLY

- Many religious believers are motivated by their faith to take responsibility for caring for the planet, and often to encourage others to do so as well.
- Most religious people will say that the Earth is sacred and unique, but they will have different faith-based reasons for making this claim. In the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam), there is the belief that God made the world and appointed humans as its stewards, taking care of it for him, whereas in Sikhi and the Hindu dharma this is more about God being present in everything, and all things being interconnected.
- Buddhist belief is not based around a god or divine being. Many Buddhists see the world as a source of inspiration, and some of the earliest writings about care for the environment come from Buddhist scriptures, thousands of years before the planet was under the threat of climate change.
- There are many differing views within as well as across religious traditions about how best to care for the environment, and there is sometimes debate on this issue.

In this unit, pupils will consider how two religious people work for better treatment of the environment. They will explore some of the key beliefs that encourage religious believers to care for the environment.

The unit suggests that pupils start by thinking about the world around them from their own perspective, discussing what they feel is special about the world and the ways in which humans have changed the natural world. Pupils are then introduced to two case studies featuring environmentalists from two different religions. After exploring the case studies and thinking about how beliefs regarding caring for the environment might be put into action, pupils are invited to undertake some creative group role-playing work to develop their understanding. From here, teachers can introduce pupils to teaching and beliefs about caring for the environment from a range of world religions. The 'belief flower' activity will help pupils organise their knowledge and think about what connects religious believers' perspectives on the environment.

## ESSENTIAL KNOWLEDGE FOR THE PUPIL

By the end of this unit pupils should know:

- Rabbi Allen and Dr Shiva are examples of Jewish and Hindu people putting their beliefs into action
- many Jews, Christians and Muslims believe that the world belongs to God and humans are stewards (Jews and Christians) or *khalifah* – guardians (Muslims)
- Hindus and Buddhists believe in *ahimsa* – not doing harm to any living thing
- for Sikh people, caring for the environment is one part of *sewa* – service

### Key vocabulary:

creation, sacred, rabbi, *tikkun olam*, shabbat, steward, *khalifah*, dharma, Goddess Shakti, *ahimsa*, *sewa*, Waheguru

## PRIOR KNOWLEDGE

In order to access the learning in this unit, pupils should have learnt about:

- beliefs about the creation of the world in Judaism, Hinduism and at least one other religion
- how and why people should care for the environment (in lessons other than RE)

## ASSESSMENT FOR 7-11s

The statements below suggest expected outcomes from this unit for 9-year-olds. Adapt them for the age of pupils you are teaching. These link to the outcomes for this series of books shown on the webpages. You may need to adapt them slightly for the syllabus or guidelines you follow.

### Expected

- Identify and explain the core beliefs and concepts of Hindus and Jewish people around care for the environment.
- Make clear connections between religious beliefs about the environment and how these can be expressed through caring for the planet.
- Reflect on and articulate lessons people might gain from the beliefs about the environment and the actions some believers carry out, including their own responses, recognising that others may think differently.

This unit helps pupils in Scotland to achieve RME 2-05a, 2-05b, 2-09a, 2-09b, 2-09c and 2-09d.

## ERESOURCES

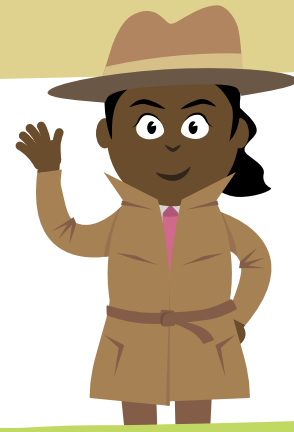
Go to [www.natre.org.uk/bqic-big-questions-big-answers](http://www.natre.org.uk/bqic-big-questions-big-answers) to access the resources below:

- information on the Jewish Climate Action Network
- further information on our case study 'interviewees' and their organisations
- Resource 5.2: case study card-sort

Members are able to download extra resources to support this unit:

- a PowerPoint to support the teaching of this unit
- *REtoday* from Autumn 2020, on climate justice
- a copy of this unit to download





## Case Study 1: Hinduism - Dr Vandana Shiva

Dr Vandana Shiva is a Hindu and a scientist. In 2010, she won the Sydney Peace Prize. Dr Shiva campaigns against the destruction of the environment. She focuses her work on the way food is produced, which can be very harmful to the planet. She challenges people and companies who use the world's resources without care just to make money. She says that this attitude towards the environment causes a harmful split between human beings and the rest of nature. As a Hindu, Dr Shiva believes that this goes against the teaching of her religion that all parts of creation – including human beings – are connected and that God is present everywhere. She has written many books on the subject and has given speeches to powerful people such as political and religious leaders.



In the 1970s, Dr Shiva was part of the Chipko movement. This name comes from the Hindi word for 'embrace', as it started with female villagers in northern India hugging ancient trees to stop them being cut down by people who wanted to make money from selling the wood and the land. This is why some people call environmental campaigners 'tree huggers' to this day.

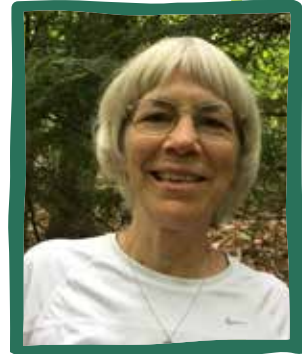
Dr Shiva challenges big businesses who try to make money in unfair ways that damage the environment, or that affect the poor. For instance, some companies have developed seeds that only produce crops for one year, so that farmers have to pay lots of money for new supplies of seeds every year. Dr Shiva believes that this is wrong as it is interfering with nature. It also makes basic food unaffordable to many of the world's poorest people.

In the 1980s, Dr Shiva set up an organisation called the Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Ecology. One of its activities is helping farmers and local communities grow lots of different types of crops on their land, rather than just one type. Growing just one type of crop over a large area of land is called 'monocrop farming'. Big businesses who buy crops from the farmers sometimes encourage this as they want to buy very large quantities very cheaply, but monocrop farming can be harmful to the environment as it reduces biodiversity.

As a Hindu, Dr Shiva believes that all living things are connected, that the Earth is our mother and that all living beings – all animals and plants – can be viewed as Her children and should be respected. She believes in Shakti, the Mother Goddess. 'Shakti' refers to power or energy that belongs to the female parts of Creation. When humans try to alter nature, she says, they are 'playing God'.

## Case Study 2: Judaism - Rabbi Katy Allen

Rabbi Katy Allen started out as a biology teacher in the USA, and later became a rabbi and an environmental campaigner. In 2013, she set up the Jewish Climate Action Network (JCAN). This organisation educates people to help them understand climate change and how they can take action against it. JCAN holds workshops and conferences. It supports local, national and global campaigns such as the People's Climate March and writing letters to people who have the power to make important decisions that affect the environment.



As a Jewish person, Rabbi Allen believes God created a world that is good and has everything we need in it. Jewish people believe that God put human beings in charge of looking after His creation, which is a great responsibility.

A big part of Rabbi Allen's work is encouraging Jewish people to make changes in their own lives to help reduce the effects of climate change. This goes beyond what they do in their homes, at work and in their leisure time: Rabbi Allen even helps find ways to make synagogues and festivals more environmentally friendly. In fact, hers is a synagogue with no walls! Rabbi Allen leads worship and celebration of Jewish festivals in the great outdoors. She believes that worshipping outside, all year round, surrounded by the natural world and the changing seasons, helps Jewish people to feel a special connection to God's creation. It helps people to develop a real love of the natural world around them. The 'Cranberry Shabbat' is a favourite for the Rabbi's Jewish community. This is where, late in October, the Shabbat service is combined with picking wild cranberries, which are then donated to help the homeless.

# WHAT DO RELIGIONS TEACH ABOUT CARING FOR THE ENVIRONMENT?

Most people believe that the Earth is special and should be treated with care and respect, and that we should make sure it is looked after for future generations. Many religious people would say that the world is holy or sacred because it was created by God or a divine power, who has trusted us to take good care of it. Many non-religious people also believe the world needs protection, but their reasons differ from those of the religious.

## Dharmic traditions

### Hindus

Hindus believe that the world is sacred because it was created by the supreme being, Brahman, who they also believe is present in everything. So, harming the world would be wrong as this would actually be harming Brahman. Hinduism teaches the principle of ahimsa, which means taking care to do no harm to other living creatures.

Many Hindus believe that all of creation is connected – humans are a part of nature, not separate from it. All Hindus have a duty to care for the environment and not do any harm. Duty is often called 'dharma' in Hinduism.



### Buddhists

Nature is a source of joy and inspiration to Buddhists. Belief in a Creator God is not part of Buddhist teachings. Many Buddhists believe that all things in the world share a connection. No part of nature can survive on its own – every part depends on everything else. The duty of care for the environment is important in Buddhist teaching. Buddhists believe in ahimsa – not doing harm to living things.

There are specific rules called Vinaya for Buddhist monks and nuns (men and women who choose to leave their families and live in Buddhist communities). Some of these rules tell monks that they must keep water and grassland clean, and they must not pollute it.



### Sikhs

Caring for the environment and trying hard not to cause damage to it is a very important part of a Sikh's duty of sewa, which means 'service'. Sikhs believe that God (whom they call Waheguru) created the world and is present within it. The Guru Granth Sahib says:

Air is our Guru, water our father, and great earth is our mother;

Day and night are the male and female nurses, in whose lap the whole world plays.

(GGS p. 8)

This tells Sikhs that Waheguru has created a world that looks after all our needs. The Earth being called our mother shows Sikhs that they need to show great respect towards the environment.



## Abrahamic traditions

Jewish people, Christians and Muslims believe that God created the world. The world belongs to God, and he put humans in charge of looking after it for him. This is called stewardship in Judaism and Christianity, and *khalifah* in Islam. This means that while the world belongs to God, people have been entrusted to look after it on his behalf.

### Jewish teaching

*Tikkun olam* means 'repairing the world' and *bal taschit* means 'you shall not destroy'. These are important ideas for Jewish people to live by. *Tikkun olam* is not just about caring for the environment, but also about trying to create peace and fairness in the world.

Jewish teachings remind people that God created a fine world for our benefit. The teachings warn that people should not ruin God's creation, as there will be no one to make it better after us.

### Christian teaching

In 2015, the Pope wrote a letter to leaders of the Catholic Church that focused very much on encouraging people to care for the environment. The Pope said that the world God created shows his love for human beings. People have a duty to care for the planet, and to be kind to one another and to other animals. He also said that richer countries should lead in helping to mend the damage that humans have done to the environment.



### Islamic teaching

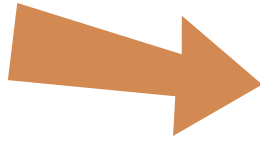
Islam teaches that people should appreciate and look after the world God created. It is a sign of God's power and love. There are many teachings in Islam that warn against wasting natural resources. The Prophet Muhammad told his followers to show kindness to animals and even to take care not to tread on ants. He also instructed people not to harm trees or plants, even in times of war.



# BELIEFS INTO ACTION



Beliefs



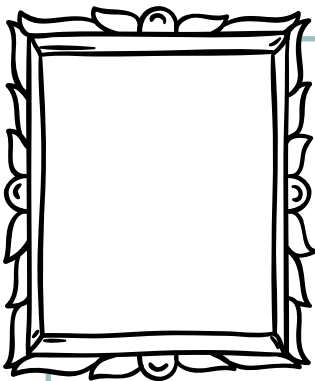
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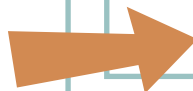
Dr Vandana Shiva



Rabbi Katy Allen



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Photos: REUTERS/Alamy Stock Photo, Rabbi Katy Allen