

Spiritual Ecology and Climate Justice: A Systematic Review of Faith-Based Environmental Movements in Southeast Asia

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Abstract

Climate change poses an existential threat to Southeast Asia, where rising sea levels and extreme weather patterns disproportionately affect marginalized communities. This research provides a systematic review of faith-based environmental movements, examining how "Spiritual Ecology"—the integration of religious values with ecological preservation—functions as a driver for climate justice. Synthesizing literature from 2021–2026, the study analyzes Islamic, Buddhist, and Christian environmental initiatives in Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines. The review investigates the transition from anthropocentric resource management to "Theocentric Stewardship," where nature is viewed as a sacred trust (Amanah or Dhamma). Findings indicate that faith-based organizations (FBOs) are uniquely positioned to mobilize grassroots action due to their moral authority and local trust. However, the study also identifies a "policy-faith gap" where spiritual advocacy is often sidelined in secular governmental climate frameworks. The research concludes that an inclusive climate justice model must integrate indigenous and spiritual ecological wisdom to achieve long-term sustainability.

Keyword: *Spiritual Ecology, Climate Justice, Southeast Asia, Faith-Based Movements, Theocentric Stewardship, Environmental Ethics.*

Introduction

The Southeast Asian region is currently at the epicenter of the global climate crisis, facing dual threats of rapid industrialization and extreme ecological vulnerability. As secular climate mitigation strategies often struggle with implementation at the grassroots level, a new discourse on "Spiritual Ecology" has emerged as a potent force for mobilization. This paradigm posits that the environmental crisis is fundamentally a spiritual crisis, stemming from a disconnect between humanity and the sacredness of the natural world. [Hasan & Ridho \(2024\)](#) argue that religious frameworks provide a moral vocabulary for "Climate Justice" that secular policy often lacks, framing environmental protection as a mandatory ethical duty rather than a mere regulatory requirement. This study explores how faith-based movements utilize sacred texts to reframe climate action as a spiritual imperative.

The central problem addressed in this review is the systemic exclusion of spiritual and indigenous ecological perspectives from mainstream climate governance. Despite the fact that Southeast Asia is home to deeply religious populations, environmental policies are frequently drafted using technocratic language that fails to resonate with the lived realities of local communities. [Abadi](#)

(2024) highlights that this "epistemological gap" leads to low public engagement and resistance to top-down conservation efforts. Furthermore, marginalized groups—who are often the most devout—suffer the most from climate-induced displacement, yet their faith-based resilience strategies are rarely documented in systematic reviews. There is an urgent need to synthesize how movements like "Green Islam" in Indonesia or "Engaged Buddhism" in Thailand are bridging this gap to demand climate justice.

The objective of this research is to conduct a systematic review of scholarly literature and field reports from 2021–2026 to evaluate the effectiveness of faith-based environmental movements in promoting climate justice. This review seeks to identify the theological drivers that lead to successful ecological activism, such as the concept of *Khalifah* (stewardship) in Islam or *Metta* (loving-kindness) in Buddhism. Fadli et al. (2024) suggest that a "Theocentric" approach to ecology offers a more sustainable motivational structure than purely economic incentives. By mapping these movements across Southeast Asia, the study aims to propose a framework for "Spiritual-Ecological Policy Integration." This objective is critical for diversifying the global climate discourse beyond Western-centric secularism.

The significance of this study lies in its potential to inform international climate negotiators and local policymakers on the untapped power of religious institutions. As the world moves toward the 2030 sustainability goals, FBOs represent a vital infrastructure for "Climate Resilience" that can operate where governments are weak or untrusted. Naswa & Muthoifin (2025) support the premise that religious leaders act as "Moral Gatekeepers" who can shift public behavior toward sustainable consumption faster than legislative mandates. Furthermore, this research contributes to the academic field of "Environmental Humanities" by documenting the unique Southeast Asian contribution to global spiritual ecology. In conclusion, understanding the intersection of faith and climate justice is not merely an academic exercise but a survival strategy for the region.

Literature Review

The theoretical evolution of "Spiritual Ecology" in Southeast Asia represents a move away from the Western Enlightenment's dualism—which separates nature from the sacred—toward an integrated holistic ontology. In the regional context, environmental degradation is frequently theorized not as a failure of technology, but as a symptom of a deeper "spiritual amnesia" regarding the interconnectedness of all life. Ruggiu & Özdemir (2026) suggest that for Southeast Asian communities, the environment is a living entity imbued with divine presence, requiring a relationship based on *Adab* (etiquette) rather than exploitation. This shift toward "Ecotheology" provides a robust intellectual foundation for climate justice, framing the protection of the biosphere as an act of worship. Consequently, the literature identifies a growing consensus that sustainable development must be anchored in the metaphysical values of the local populace to be socially viable.

A primary theme in contemporary scholarship is the concept of **Theocentric Stewardship**, particularly the Islamic framework of *Khalifah* (Vicegerency) and *Mizan* (Balance). Recent literature explores how Indonesian movements like "Eco-Pesantren" (green Islamic boarding schools) translate these abstract theological concepts into tangible conservation practices. Hasan & Ridho (2024) argue that framing the climate crisis as a disruption of the *Mizan* creates a powerful moral

imperative for restorative justice among the *Ummah*. This approach identifies humans as trustees of the earth, responsible for maintaining a delicate cosmic equilibrium. This stewardship model stands in stark contrast to anthropocentric capitalism, offering a restorative justice lens that prioritizes the needs of future generations and the non-human world.

In the Buddhist context of mainland Southeast Asia, "Engaged Buddhism" serves as a critical catalyst for environmental protection, emphasizing the doctrine of *Interdependent Co-arising* (Pratītyasamutpāda). Literature from 2023–2026 highlights the phenomenon of "Monk-led Conservation" in Thailand and Cambodia, where forest monasteries serve as sanctuaries against illegal logging. [Siti Farahiyah Ab Rahim et al. \(2025\)](#) reflect that these movements utilize the ritual of "Tree Ordination" to extend religious sanctity to ancient forests, effectively deterring industrial encroachment. By viewing the forest as a site for spiritual liberation, these movements demonstrate how religious symbolism can be weaponized for environmental defense. This integration of *Dhamma* with ecology proves that spiritual practices are capable of generating sophisticated strategies for local climate resilience.

The discourse on "Climate Justice" within Southeast Asian faith-based movements is increasingly focused on the disproportionate impact of ecological collapse on the poor. In the Philippines, the integration of Catholic Social Teaching with indigenous "Care for our Common Home" (*Laudato Si'*) has mobilized rural communities against extractive mining. [Mustapha \(2025\)](#) asserts that faith-based movements redefine climate justice as a "preferential option for the poor," emphasizing that those least responsible for carbon emissions are the most vulnerable to their consequences. This perspective transitions environmentalism from a middle-class aesthetic concern to a radical struggle for human rights and spiritual dignity. Literature confirms that when climate action is framed through the lens of "Sacred Justice," it bridges the gap between urban activism and rural survivalism.

Furthermore, a significant scholarly focus is directed toward the "Policy-Faith Gap," wherein secular governmental frameworks fail to incorporate spiritual ecological wisdom. While governments focus on carbon credits and technocratic metrics, faith-based movements emphasize behavioral change and moral transformation. [UNESCO \(2025\)](#) notes that while international climate treaties are essential, they often lack the "soul" required to inspire mass behavioral shifts at the local level. Recent studies suggest that integrating religious leaders into official climate advisory boards would enhance the legitimacy and implementation of sustainability policies. This research gap underscores the necessity for a "Spiritual-Ecological Governance" model that respects both scientific data and metaphysical convictions.

Finally, the literature explores the role of **Digital Spiritual Ecology**, where social media platforms are used by religious influencers to promote eco-halal lifestyles and "mindful consumption." This digital manifestation of faith-based environmentalism targets the younger generation, merging modern lifestyle aesthetics with traditional religious ethics. [Alamsyah \(2025\)](#) explains that this "Cyber-Stewardship" allows for the rapid dissemination of green fatwas and environmental sermons across borders. However, it also raises questions about the "commercialization of the sacred" in the digital marketplace. In conclusion, the literature review affirms that faith-based environmentalism in Southeast Asia is a

dynamic, multi-dimensional force that is essential for achieving a just and sustainable transition in the face of global climate volatility.

Method

The object of this research is the phenomenon of **Faith-Based Environmental Movements (FBEMs)** in Southeast Asia, specifically focusing on the intersection of spiritual ecology and climate justice. The central problem analyzed is the effectiveness and systemic barriers of these movements in a region characterized by extreme climate vulnerability and deep religious diversity. [Najib et al. \(2025\)](#) emphasize that while faith-based organizations possess high social capital, their integration into formal climate policy remains fragmented. This study seeks to investigate how theocentric frameworks—such as Islamic *Khalifah*, Buddhist *Metta*, and Christian *Stewardship*—are operationalized into tangible environmental actions. By focusing on Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines, the research aims to capture the diverse manifestations of spiritual resilience against ecological collapse.

This study employs a **Systematic Literature Review (SLR)** methodology, adhering to the **PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses)** guidelines. This design is selected to ensure a rigorous, transparent, and replicable synthesis of scholarly discourse from 2021 to 2026. [Ruggiu & Özdemir \(2026\)](#) suggest that an SLR is the most effective approach for mapping emerging interdisciplinary fields like spiritual ecology, as it allows for the identification of patterns, gaps, and contradictions across multiple datasets. The systematic nature of this review minimizes researcher bias and provides a comprehensive overview of how "Climate Justice" is theologically and sociologically defined within the Southeast Asian context.

The theoretical framework utilized is the **Spiritual Ecology and Social Justice (SESJ) Framework**. This theory posits that environmental conservation is inseparable from spiritual values and social equity, advocating for a "Theocentric" worldview over a "Capitalocentric" one. [Mustapha \(2025\)](#) asserts that this framework is particularly suited for the global south, where religious identity often dictates communal resource management. The SESJ framework serves as the analytical lens for evaluating the case studies, ensuring that the review accounts for both the metaphysical motivations and the material outcomes of faith-based activism. By anchoring the study in this framework, the research bridges the gap between environmental humanities and political ecology.

The data acquisition process involves a multi-stage search across primary academic databases, including **Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar**, as well as gray literature from NGOs like **GreenFaith and Islamic Relief**. Key search terms include "Spiritual Ecology Southeast Asia," "Faith-Based Climate Justice," "Green Islam Indonesia," and "Engaged Buddhism Thailand." [Al-Momani et al. \(2025\)](#) highlight that in regions with high religious influence, field reports from religious institutions provide critical "lived data" that traditional journals might overlook. The selection criteria prioritize peer-reviewed studies published between 2021 and 2026, ensuring that the findings reflect the post-pandemic urgency of the climate crisis. This robust data collection ensures a high degree of content validity for the subsequent analysis.

The data analysis technique utilizes **Qualitative Thematic Synthesis and Comparative Policy Mapping**. The collected literature is coded into themes such

as "Theological Drivers," "Grassroots Mobilization Strategies," and "Barriers to Policy Integration." [Alamsyah \(2025\)](#) explains that this synthesis allows researchers to identify "best practices" in spiritual-ecological governance that are transferable across different religious contexts. The researcher then compares these faith-based strategies against national climate action plans (NDCs) to assess the level of institutional synergy. Through this comparative approach, the study formulates a strategic model for "Inclusive Climate Governance" that respects the spiritual landscape of the region.

Results and Discussion

Results

The first finding highlights that "Theocentric Stewardship" has successfully transitioned from a theological abstraction to a functional community-based conservation model. In Indonesia, the "Eco-Pesantren" initiative has mobilized thousands of students to implement sustainable waste management and reforestation based on the concept of *Khalifah* (stewardship). [Hasan & Ridho \(2024\)](#) report that these religious schools achieve a 40% higher compliance rate in environmental programs compared to state-led initiatives due to the internal moral obligation felt by the community. This manifestation of spiritual ecology proves that religious identity serves as a powerful behavioral driver for climate mitigation. Consequently, the research identifies that when environmental protection is framed as an act of worship (*Ibadah*), it bypasses the "apathy barrier" often found in secular environmentalism.

The second finding reveals that faith-based organizations (FBOs) are the primary actors in securing "Climate Justice" for marginalized coastal and rural communities. In the Philippines, the Catholic Church's "Eco-Justice" desks have provided legal and spiritual support to communities resisting extractive mining industries that threaten local watersheds. [Mustapha \(2025\)](#) observes that FBOs utilize their institutional land and financial resources to create "sanctuaries of resilience" for those displaced by extreme weather events. The result is a rights-based environmentalism that prioritizes the dignity of the poor over industrial expansion. This manifestation suggests that faith is not a passive sentiment but a radical shield for the victims of climate change.

The third finding identifies "Tree Ordination" and "Sacred Forest" designations as the most effective grassroots strategies for preventing illegal logging in Buddhist-majority regions like Thailand and Cambodia. Findings show that ordaining trees as "monks" imbues them with a spiritual sanctity that loggers and local officials are hesitant to violate. [Siti Farahiyah Ab Rahim et al. \(2025\)](#) highlight that this practice has successfully preserved over 50,000 hectares of primary forest that were previously vulnerable to industrial encroachment. This manifestation of spiritual-ecological defense demonstrates that cultural symbols can provide a more effective deterrent than legal regulations alone. Ultimately, the sacralization of nature serves as a non-violent yet potent form of environmental resistance.

The fourth finding exposes a significant "Policy-Faith Gap," where national climate action plans (NDCs) in Southeast Asia largely ignore the role of religious institutions. Despite the proven efficacy of faith-based mobilization, government frameworks remain predominantly technocentric, focusing on carbon credits and infrastructure rather than behavioral ethics. [Ruggiu & Özdemir \(2026\)](#) argue that this exclusion limits the "social reach" of climate policies, as the majority of the

population trusts religious leaders more than political bureaucrats. The result is a fragmented climate governance model where grassroots spiritual energy is disconnected from state resources. This manifestation underscores the need for "Integrated Ecological Governance" that recognizes FBOs as formal partners in sustainability.

The fifth finding reveals the emergence of "Green Fatwas" and "Eco-Sermons" as decisive tools for shifting consumer behavior toward "Mindful Consumption." In 2024, several regional Islamic councils issued specific rulings against single-use plastics and excessive water consumption during religious rituals. [Alamsyah \(2025\)](#) notes that these religious decrees have led to a noticeable reduction in waste during major religious festivals. This manifestation of "Moral Regulation" indicates that religious legal frameworks are adapting to address modern ecological sins. Consequently, the research affirms that the "internalized law" of faith is often more effective than external civil penalties in promoting sustainable lifestyles.

The sixth finding identifies that faith-based environmentalism is a key driver for "Intergenerational Climate Justice," as it focuses on the preservation of the earth for "future souls." Findings suggest that religious narratives of lineage and ancestral trust encourage older generations to sacrifice immediate economic gains for long-term ecological health. [Naswa & Muthoifin \(2025\)](#) highlight that "Grandparents for Climate" movements in the Philippines and Indonesia are often rooted in the spiritual duty to leave a "blessed inheritance" for their grandchildren. This manifestation of behavioral change provides a psychological counter-narrative to the short-termism of the global market. In summary, spiritual ecology extends the "temporal horizon" of climate action.

The seventh finding reveals that "Digital Spiritual Ecology" has empowered a new generation of "Eco-Influencers" who merge religious aesthetics with environmental activism. These influencers use platforms like Instagram and TikTok to promote "Eco-Halal" lifestyles, making environmentalism culturally relevant to urban Muslim youth. [Arjaya et al. \(2024\)](#) observe that this digital shift has democratized environmental discourse, moving it from elite academic circles to popular religious spaces. The result is a "lifestyle-based activism" that integrates prayers with tree-planting and recycling campaigns. This manifestation shows that the "Sacred" is increasingly being articulated through digital media to inspire ecological mobilization.

The eighth finding highlights that "Spiritual Resilience" acts as a critical mental health buffer for communities suffering from "Eco-Anxiety" and climate trauma. Findings show that faith provides a framework of hope and perseverance (*Sabr*) that prevents communal despair after devastating floods or typhoons. [Abadi \(2024\)](#) notes that religious rituals of mourning and rebuilding help communities process ecological loss without losing their social cohesion. This manifestation of psychological resilience suggests that faith is an essential component of "Disaster Risk Reduction" (DRR) strategies. Ultimately, the spiritual dimension provides the emotional stamina required for long-term climate adaptation.

The final finding confirms that faith-based movements are the most successful in promoting "Circular Economy" practices through religious charitable institutions. The redistribution of wealth via *Zakat*, *Sadaqah*, and *Dana* is increasingly being channeled into green micro-finance and renewable energy projects for poor villages. [Dewaya \(2025\)](#) argues that this "Spiritual Finance" model provides a sustainable

alternative to debt-based development. The result is a localized "Green Economy" that is both ethically grounded and community-owned. This manifestation demonstrates that faith-based environmentalism is not just about advocacy, but also about the practical restructuring of economic relations in favor of the earth.

Discussion

The analytical synthesis of these findings underscores that **Spiritual Ecology** is not merely a supplementary cultural layer but a foundational driver of environmental resilience in Southeast Asia. This research confirms that when climate action is framed as a sacred duty—whether through *Khalifah* in Islam or *Interdependent Co-arising* in Buddhism—it triggers a more profound behavioral shift than secular legislative mandates. [Hasan & Ridho \(2024\)](#) argue that the "moral authority" of faith-based movements allows them to bypass the political polarization that often stalls climate policy. By fulfilling the research objective to map these movements, this study demonstrates that "Theocentric Stewardship" effectively bridges the gap between individual ethics and collective survival. Consequently, the transition toward a sustainable future in the region is inextricably linked to the revitalization of indigenous and religious ecological wisdom.

The phenomenon of "Tree Ordination" and "Eco-Pesantren" highlights a critical shift from anthropocentric resource management to a **Biocentric Ethic** rooted in the sacred. This research identifies that these strategies succeed because they utilize "cultural deterrents" that are more culturally resonant than civil fines. [Siti Farahiyah Ab Rahim et al. \(2025\)](#) reflect that the sacralization of the forest effectively creates a "moral exclusion zone" against industrial exploitation. This finding suggests that the preservation of biodiversity is not just a scientific necessity but a spiritual preservation of the "Signs of God" or the *Dhamma*. This synthesis confirms that spiritual ecology provides a robust intellectual defense against the commodification of nature, re-establishing the environment as a sacred trust (*Amanah*) rather than a mere asset.

Reflection on the "Policy-Faith Gap" reveals a systemic failure in current climate governance to utilize the "social infrastructure" of religious institutions. While international frameworks like the Paris Agreement provide technical targets, they often lack the "psychological hook" required for mass mobilization in deeply religious societies. [Ruggiu & Özdemir \(2026\)](#) suggest that the exclusion of FBOs from formal policy-making is a form of "secular bias" that undermines the efficacy of climate mitigation. This study argues that "Inclusive Climate Governance" must adopt a hybrid model where scientific data is translated into religious vernacular by trusted spiritual leaders. This reflection confirms that the goal of climate justice cannot be realized without an "Epistemological Pluralism" that respects diverse ways of knowing and valuing the natural world.

The implications of "Digital Spiritual Ecology" point toward a democratization of environmental activism among Southeast Asian youth. By merging eco-halal lifestyles with digital aesthetics, movements are successfully rebranding environmentalism from a niche scientific concern to a mainstream "moral fashion." [Arjaya et al. \(2024\)](#) observe that this "Cyber-Stewardship" creates a peer-to-peer accountability mechanism that is highly effective in urban contexts. Practically, this implies that environmental NGOs should pivot their communication strategies to align with religious calendars and digital spiritual trends. The academic implication is

the need for a new branch of "Digital Environmental Humanities" that studies how sacred values are renegotiated in the era of social media. In summary, the digitalization of faith is accelerating the "greening" of the *Ummah* and the *Sangha*.

The analysis of "Spiritual Resilience" identifies faith as an essential component of **Climate Adaptation** and disaster risk reduction. In a region frequently hit by typhoons and floods, the ability of faith to provide a "narrative of hope" (*Sabr* and *Metta*) is a vital public health asset. [Abadi \(2024\)](#) reinforces that religious institutions act as the "first responders" of the soul, preventing communal collapse after ecological trauma. This demonstrates that climate justice is not only about physical safety but also about "spiritual security" and mental well-being. Therefore, integrating spiritual support systems into national disaster frameworks is a strategic necessity for regional stability. This insight proves that the preservation of the family (*Hifẓ al-Nas*) and the mind (*Hifẓ al-Aql*) in the climate era requires a spiritually grounded approach to resilience.

The immediate action required is the formal institutionalization of "Spiritual-Ecological Audits" for national development projects. This strategy involves requiring a "Religious and Cultural Impact Assessment" alongside traditional Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) to ensure that development does not violate the sacred values of local communities. [Mustapha \(2025\)](#) suggests that governments should establish "Interfaith Climate Councils" with the authority to veto projects that threaten sacred forests or watersheds. Furthermore, there is a pressing need for "Green Waqf" and "Faith-Based Micro-finance" to fund localized renewable energy transitions. Subsequent research should investigate the scalability of these faith-based models across the Global South. Without these strategic integrations, the quest for climate justice will remain a top-down exercise that fails to touch the hearts of those most affected.

Conclusion

The definitive synthesis of this systematic review confirms that **Spiritual Ecology** is a critical, yet undervalued, catalyst for climate justice in Southeast Asia. This research proves that faith-based movements—ranging from "Green Islam" in Indonesia to "Engaged Buddhism" in Thailand—provide a robust moral framework that effectively bridges the gap between scientific urgency and grassroots behavioral change. By reframing environmental protection as a sacred trust (*Amanah*) and a path to spiritual liberation, these movements move beyond the limitations of secular technocracy, which often fails to resonate with the deeply religious populations of the region. It is significant to conclude that the success of climate mitigation in the Global South is contingent upon the "sacralization of sustainability," where ecological health is viewed as an extension of spiritual integrity. Ultimately, the findings suggest that the preservation of the biosphere requires a "theocentric turn" that restores the ethical connection between humanity, the divine, and the natural world.

The scholarly contribution of this study lies in the establishment of the **"Integrated Spiritual-Ecological Governance Model,"** which offers a blueprint for incorporating religious social capital into formal climate action plans (NDCs). Practically, this research provides validated evidence for policymakers to engage faith-based organizations (FBOs) as formal partners in reforestation, waste management, and disaster risk reduction. The added value of this work is its identification of "cultural deterrents," such as tree ordination, as highly effective tools for conservation

that can complement legal regulations. Theoretically, this study enriches the discourse on **Environmental Humanities** by demonstrating that "Climate Justice" is not merely a political or economic struggle, but a metaphysical one centered on the right to spiritual and ecological dignity. This contribution is expected to serve as a cornerstone for a new generation of "Inclusive Climate Policies" that respect both empirical data and the sacred values of the *Ummah* and the *Sangha*.

While this systematic review provides a comprehensive analysis of current trends, it is limited by the lack of long-term quantitative data regarding the carbon-sequestration impact of faith-based conservation zones compared to state-managed ones. These limitations serve as a strategic invitation for future researchers to conduct longitudinal empirical studies on the "biophysical outcomes" of spiritual-ecological initiatives. Future research opportunities should focus on the development of "Interfaith Climate Finance" mechanisms, exploring how *Zakat* and *Dana* can be systematically leveraged for large-scale renewable energy transitions. Additionally, exploring the intersection of "Indigenous Animism" and mainstream religious ecology presents a fertile ground for understanding the syncretic nature of Southeast Asian environmentalism. In closing, this study remains a vital call to action for the global community to recognize that the "soul of the earth" cannot be saved through technology alone, but through a profound spiritual awakening that recognizes the sanctity of all life.

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