

SPEAK TRUTH TO POWER



POPE FRANCIS

RELIGION AND CLIMATE CHANGE

KEY LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of the lesson, students will:

- Explain science-based evidence of the existence and impact of global climate change.
- Summarize and explain the impact of Pope Francis's 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si'*.
- Describe climate change statements published by leading world religions.
- Communicate personal essays on climate change that reflect moral beliefs and conditions in the local community.

OVERVIEW

In this activity, students compare and contrast science-based reports documenting the need to address climate change with the moral and religious arguments advanced in Pope Francis's influential 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si'*. They then review primary and secondary source materials to research basic characteristics of leading world religions and analyze climate change statements published by these religious groups. Finally, students will draft philosophical essays on climate change modeled on religious documents and reflecting their personal moral beliefs.

UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

- **Article 3:** Right to life, liberty, and security of the person
- **Article 25:** Right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family

TARGET AUDIENCE

Social Studies, Language Arts, Grades 9–12

ACTIVITY DURATION

Two to three 45–60 minute class periods

ENDURING UNDERSTANDINGS

- All humans have basic rights that are universal and transcend the rights granted by nations in which they live. Among these rights are the right to life, liberty, and the security of person; and the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family.
- Climate change disproportionately threatens the basic human rights of historically marginalized groups and of future generations.

- We have a collective responsibility to protect and defend the human rights of people everywhere and of future generations.
- World religions can play a major role in advocating for policies to limit the impact of climate change.

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- Why is climate change a human rights issue?
- What role do world religions play in protecting human rights?

MATERIALS

- UN definition of human rights (to be displayed)
- *Rules for a Socratic Seminar/A Guide to Annotating Text* handout (one per student or displayed)
- Graphic organizers for National Climate Report and *Laudato Si'* (one per student)
- Excerpts from the Fourth National Climate Assessment and *Laudato Si'* (one per student)
- *Socratic Seminar Self-Evaluation* handout (one per student)
- *World Religions and Climate Change—Research Notes* handout (one per group of 2-3)
- *Gallery Walk—World Religions Respond to Climate Change* handout (one per student)
- *Writing Your Personal Statement on Climate Change* handout (one per student)
- Poster or chart paper
- Markers

BACKGROUND INFORMATION AND LINKS

Climate Change in the United States and Beyond

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) was created in the aftermath of World War II, in an effort to ensure According to the Fourth National Climate Assessment (NCA), global climate change is already impacting communities across the United States and beyond. Intensified weather-related events such as wildfires and floods, as well as changing average conditions “damage infrastructure, ecosystems and social systems that provide essential benefits to communities.” Scientists expect the impact of these changes to “increasingly disrupt and damage...industries that depend on natural resources and favorable climate conditions, such as agriculture, tourism, and fisheries.” In addition, the impact of climate change in other countries threatens to disrupt American industries that operate overseas and global supply chains that bring goods to consumers and businesses.

Climate change disproportionately impacts marginalized groups in the United States and around the world. Many indigenous peoples rely on natural resources to make a living in the agriculture, forestry, or tourism industries. The NCA states that rising temperatures also “are expected to alter the geographic range and distribution of disease-carrying insects and pests, exposing more people to ticks that carry Lyme disease and mosquitoes that transmit viruses.” These developments will disproportionately affect children, older adults, low-income communities, and individuals who lack access to immunizations and health care.

Organizations within the United Nations have emphasized the threat climate change presents to global human rights. The UN’s Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) stated that “climate change threatens the effective

enjoyment of a range of human rights including those to life water and sanitation, health, housing, self-determination, culture and development,” and noted the human rights obligation global states have to mitigate its consequences. The OHCHR publishes reports, fact sheets and research studies on the relationship between climate change and human rights, including a December 2019 report on the adverse impact of climate change on human rights in Latin America.

In 2015, 196 countries negotiated an agreement on taking action to combat climate change that came to be known as the Paris Agreement. Signatories to the agreement committed to taking steps to limit the increase in global average temperature this century to 1.5 degrees C (2.7 degrees F). Yet, despite the agreement, global emissions from fossil fuels increased 1.5 percent in 2017, 2.1 percent in 2018, and 0.6 percent in 2019. The last five years have been the hottest on record.

Analysis suggests that if governments take immediate action now, the world can reduce carbon emissions within 12 years and hold global temperature increases below the 1.5 degrees C threshold. To find out whether governments around the world are ready to take action, National Geographic teamed up with the Climate Action Tracker (CAT) to create a “climate change report card.” They found that some countries are meeting their goals to cap climate emissions while others are falling far short.

Pope Francis’s Leadership on Climate Change

In 2015, Pope Francis released a papal encyclical, *Laudato Si’*. A papal encyclical is one of the highest forms of communication by the pope and usually deals with some aspect of Catholic teaching. *Laudato Si’* focused on ecology and stated that climate change is a moral issue. In the letter, Francis urged the clergy to accept that climate change is real and largely “a result of human activity.” He described climate change as an urgent issue, stating, “Never have we so hurt and mistreated our common home as we have in the last two hundred years.” Francis also framed climate change as a social justice issue, stating, “We have to realize that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor.”

Francis also used the encyclical to criticize world leaders for their failure to take action, writing, “Those who will have to suffer the consequences ... will not forget this failure of conscience and responsibility.” He went on to state, “True statecraft is manifest when, in difficult times, we uphold high principles and think of the long-term common good.” In particular, he called on more industrialized nations to take responsibility for their actions: “Reducing greenhouse gases requires honesty, courage and responsibility, above all on the part of those countries which are more powerful and pollute the most.”

Francis also focused the encyclical on the roles that individuals and businesses play in causing and addressing climate change. He urged people to curb their consumption, writing, “Obsession with a consumerist lifestyle, above all when few people are capable of maintaining it, can only lead to violence and mutual destruction.” He urged businesses to focus not just on maximizing profits but on the real costs associated with doing so, including ecological ones. Despite his dire warnings, Francis made clear that the situation is not hopeless. “Humanity still has the ability to work together in building our common home ... Truly, much can be done!”

Sources

- [National Climate Assessment](#)
- [UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights](#) (includes December, 2019 report on Latin America)
- [Climate Action Tracker](#)
- [Seven Solutions to the Climate Crisis](#)
- [7 Instant Ways to Reduce Your Carbon Footprint](#)
- [Laudato Si’](#)

This activity is sequenced in four phases: **Ask, Analyze, Apply, and Act**:

- Ask: Students will watch a video segment describing impacts of climate change on marginalized communities. They will then consider the question: “Why is climate change a human rights issue?”
- Analyze: The students will contrast excerpts from a science-based climate report with excerpts from *Laudato Si’*. In a Socratic Seminar-style discussion, they will address the questions: “How is *Laudato Si’* different than scientific and secular reports about climate change? How are they alike?”
- Apply: Students will research basic characteristics of leading world religions and read climate change statements published by these religious groups. They will participate in a gallery walk activity to gather information about groups they did not research, and reflect on the question: “Why do religious groups play an important role in climate change activism?”
- Act: The students will take action to become leaders on climate change by drafting philosophical essays on climate change that reflect their personal moral beliefs and reflect climate concerns in their specific communities

PROCEDURE

Ask

1. Display for the students the UN’s definition of human rights: “Human rights are rights inherent to all human beings, regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, or any other status. Human rights include the right to life and liberty, freedom from slavery and torture, freedom of opinion and expression, the right to work and education, and many more. Everyone is entitled to these rights, without discrimination.”
2. Direct pairs of students to read the definition and address these questions: “What does *inherent* mean? What are some examples of modern-day threats to the human rights listed in the definition?”
3. Call on one or more student volunteers to share their pairs’ definitions of *inherent*. As needed, use the following information to ensure that all students understand the term, and why it is so important to understanding human rights:
 - Inherent: involved in the constitution or essential character of something; belonging by nature or habit. Human rights are said to be inherent because they are an essential character of humanity—they belong to humans by nature.
4. Ask students to cite a handful of examples of modern-day threats to human rights. Ask each student to identify which right or rights from the definition are threatened by each example.
5. Tell students that the class will consider how climate change might threaten human rights. Show the video segment “BESE Explains: [The Climate Gap with Zoe Saldana](#).”
6. Ask pairs of students to take 2 minutes to address the question, “Why is climate change a human rights issue?” Briefly discuss and refine responses with the full group. Announce to students that in this lesson, they will examine moral and religious arguments for climate action

Analyze

7. Direct students to arrange seats in a half-moon, square, or circle so all students can see each other. As needed, remove desks if they obstruct full view.
8. Seat yourself on the same level as the students. If in the course of the seminar you find that the students are directing their speech to you, then you may remove yourself quietly to sit outside the circle. You may take notes

in an unobtrusive manner. They might come in handy toward the end of the wrap-up.

9. Explain to students that the purpose of this activity is to use a discussion to foster a deeper understanding of different types of arguments for action on climate change. Distribute or display the basic rules for a Socratic seminar with the students. Read and review with the group as needed.
10. Distribute or provide students access to the handouts "Excerpt from the National Climate Assessment" and "Excerpt from *Laudato Si'*, the Pope's Encyclical on Climate." Direct students to read straight through the excerpts, or read aloud as a class. Students should keep in mind the following questions as they read the text:
 - How does the National Climate Report support arguments for action to address climate change? How does *Laudato Si'*?
11. Next, direct students to complete a close rereading of the text. As students reread the text, they will annotate it. Explain to students that annotate means to add notes to a text by explaining or commenting as you read. In other words, students will read with a pen or pencil in hand. When students annotate, they might consider:
 - Underlining important words or phrases
 - Writing questions they have about the author's meaning in the margins
 - Writing summaries of key points in the margins
 - Underlining vivid imagery or descriptions
 - Creating their own code of symbols or colors to identify key points or ideas
12. After students finish reading and annotating the text, direct them to complete the graphic organizer.
13. Decide whether you or a strong student will serve as leader of the Socratic Seminar. Begin or have the discussion leader begin the seminar by asking the following questions: How is *Laudato Si'* different than more science-based reports about climate change? How are they alike?"
14. Ask participants in the discussion to begin by relating their responses to the text of the National Climate Assessment and/or *Laudato Si'*. You can restate the question if the conversation gets off track. Encourage students to ask the questions from their list and take the time to listen attentively to the answers.
15. If necessary, have the discussion leader ask questions to move the discussion along. Questions could include: Who is the target audience for each text? How would each report describe harm caused by climate change in different ways? Which do you find more effective?
16. Encourage all students to participate. You may use pennies or chips to get everyone to speak. Allot students a set number of chips. Students lose a chip when they contribute to the discussion. Students should be encouraged to lose all their chips. If everyone is talking and not listening, a talking stick may be used, but only as long as it is necessary. The discussion leader may also keep a list of students who have asked to speak.
17. As the discussion nears its conclusion, ask students to bring up any questions from their list that have not yet been posed or answered satisfactorily.
18. Invite the discussion leader to summarize the main points of the discussion.
19. Direct students to complete the self-evaluation.

Apply

20. Place students in groups of 2–3 depending on class size. Announce to the class that each group will conduct basic research and then analyze climate change statements from one major world religion. Possible religions: Baha’i, Buddhism, Hinduism, Indigenous Traditions, Islam, Jainism, and Judaism.
21. Distribute the *World Religions and Climate Change: Research Notes* sheet. This will be used for notetaking during student analysis of the materials.
22. Students will first compile information from the website of the United Religions Initiative (URI) about the basic tenets and characteristics of their assigned religious group. They will then examine climate change statements from world religions found on the webpage of the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology.
23. Direct students to transfer information from their *World Religions and Climate Change: Research Notes* sheet onto a poster that will be displayed for the classroom gallery walk.
24. Distribute the *Gallery Walk: World Religions Respond to Climate Change* table. Students will use this sheet to record notes during the gallery walk activity.
25. As an exit ticket, at the conclusion of the gallery walk activity, direct students to submit written responses to the question, “Why do religious groups play an important role in climate change activism?”

Act

26. Explain that, just like Pope Francis and other religious groups, students can develop and share position statements on climate change that reflect their personal moral beliefs, as well as the concerns of their specific communities.
27. Distribute copies of the *Personal Statement on Climate Change* handout and review the directions. Consider providing students with final product alternatives to an essay. For example, students could also outline their personal beliefs in digital slide presentations.
28. Facilitate a session where students can share final products with classmates, refine their final products, and send to elected officials or share with members of the community.

CONNECTIONS

Connect to Student Lives	Connect to Contemporary Events	Connect to the Future
Students will reflect on how the climate change issue connects with their own experiences and moral belief systems.	Students will look at the status of climate change in the U.S. and abroad and analyze religious-based advocacy tools and tactics.	Students will promote understanding about climate change and draft personal statements that can be used as policy advocacy tools.

NATIONAL STANDARDS

College, Career & Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies Standards

- D1.5-9-12. Determine the kinds of sources that will be helpful in answering compelling and supporting questions, taking into consideration multiple points of view represented in the sources, the types of sources available, and the potential uses of the sources.
- D2.Civ.5.9-12. Evaluate the citizens’ and institutions’ effectiveness in addressing social and political problems at

the local, state, tribal, national, and/or international level.

- D2.Civ.7.9-12 Apply civic virtues and democratic principles when working with others.
- D2.Civ.10.9-12 Analyze the impact and the appropriate roles of personal interests and perspectives on the application of civic virtues, democratic principles, constitutional rights, and human rights.
- D2.Civ.14.9-12 Analyze historical, contemporary, and emerging means of changing societies, promoting the common good, and protecting rights.
- D2.Geo.5.9-12 Evaluate how political and economic decisions throughout time have influenced cultural and environmental characteristics of various places and regions.
- D2.Geo.9.9-12 Evaluate the influence of long-term climate variability on human migration and settlement patterns, resource use, and land uses at local-to-global scales.
- D2.Geo.12.9-12 Evaluate the consequences of human-made and natural catastrophes on global trade, politics, and human migration.
- D3.1.9-12 Gather relevant information from multiple sources representing a wide range of views while using the origin, authority, structure, context, and corroborative value of the sources to guide the selection.
- D4.6.9-12 Use disciplinary and interdisciplinary lenses to understand the characteristics and causes of local, regional, and global problems; instances of such problems in multiple contexts; and challenges and opportunities faced by those trying to address these problems over time and place.
- D4.7.9-12 Assess options for individual and collective action to address local, regional, and global problems by engaging in self-reflection, strategy identification, and complex causal reasoning.

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts

- RI.11-12.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain
- W.11-12.7 Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.
- W.11-12.9 Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.
- SL.11-12.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher led) with diverse partners on grades 11–12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
- SL.11-12.4 Present information, findings, and supporting evidence, conveying a clear and distinct perspective, such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning, alternative or opposing perspectives are addressed, and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and a range of formal and informal tasks.

“Human rights are rights inherent to all human beings, regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, or any other status. Human rights include the right to life and liberty, freedom from slavery and torture, freedom of opinion and expression, the right to work and education, and many more. Everyone is entitled to these rights, without discrimination.”

—UNITED NATIONS, [HTTPS://WWW.UN.ORG/EN/SECTIONS/ISSUES-DEPTH/HUMAN-RIGHTS/](https://www.un.org/en/sections/issues-depth/human-rights/)

1. A Socratic Seminar is a discussion. Try to talk to everyone in your discussion group and make eye contact with your audience.
2. Be courteous. If someone else is speaking, do not interrupt.
3. Be mindful of how long you are speaking. Others also want to share their ideas, so keep your comments brief and clear.
4. Use evidence from the text to support your ideas.
5. Ask questions if you do not understand what another student has said.
6. Refrain from criticizing. If you do not agree with something, use textual evidence to *question* the statement. For example, you might say, "You said that Pope Francis resists using scientific evidence. However, I read that...Can you explain how you arrived at your conclusion?"
7. A Socratic Seminar is not a debate. You do not have to get others to think the same way that you do. Instead, you are looking to understand and discuss the meaning of text together.

***Annotating* text means adding notes to a text by explaining or commenting as you read. It calls for reading text with a pen or pencil in your hand.**

When annotating, consider:

- Underlining important words or phrases
- Recording questions in the margins about the author's meaning
- Writing summaries of key points from the text
- Underlining vivid imagery or descriptions
- Creating your own code of symbols or colors to identify key points or ideas

AFTER READING THE TEXT, COMPLETE THE GRAPHIC ORGANIZER BELOW.

Name of Text: Excerpt from 2019 National Climate Report

Author: U.S. Global Change Research Program

Question	Response
What is the main idea of the text?	
What evidence from the text supports the main idea you identified?	
Level 1 questions are related to the text and focus on concrete examples from the text. Example: "What are some impacts of stronger tropical cyclones?" Identify two Level 1 questions you have about the text.	
Level 2 questions are more abstract questions about theme or relationships between the text and yourself. Example: "How do we know human-caused emissions contribute to climate change?" Identify two Level 2 questions you have about the text	

AFTER READING THE TEXT, COMPLETE THE GRAPHIC ORGANIZER BELOW.

Name of Text: *Laudato Si'*

Author: Pope Francis

Question	Response
What is the main idea of the text?	
What evidence from the text supports the main idea you identified?	
Level 1 questions are related to the text and focus on concrete examples from the text. Example: "What are some impacts of stronger tropical cyclones?" Identify two Level 1 questions you have about the text.	
Level 2 questions are more abstract questions about theme or relationships between the text and yourself. Example: "How do we know human-caused emissions contribute to climate change?" Identify two Level 2 questions you have about the text	

EXCERPT FROM THE FOURTH NATIONAL CLIMATE ASSESSMENT, 2018

In 1990, Congress passed the Global Change Research Act. This law requires the U.S. Global Change Research Program (USGCRP) to deliver a report at least every four years to update Congress on global climate change and its impacts. Below is an excerpt from the Fourth National Climate Assessment (NCA4), issued in 2018.

Human-caused emissions of greenhouse gases and air pollutants have also affected observed ocean–atmosphere variability in the Atlantic Ocean, and these changes have contributed to the observed increasing trend in North Atlantic tropical cyclone activity since the 1970s¹⁶⁶ (see also review by Sobel et al. 2016¹⁶⁷). In a warmer world, there will be a greater potential for stronger tropical cyclones (also known as hurricanes and typhoons, depending on the region) in all ocean basins.^{15.166.168.169.170.171} Climate model simulations indicate an increase in global tropical cyclone intensity in a warmer world, as well as an increase in the number of very intense tropical cyclones, consistent with current scientific understanding of the physics of the climate system.^{15.166.168.169.170.172} In the future, the total number of tropical storms is generally projected to remain steady, or even decrease, but the most intense storms are generally projected to become more frequent, and the amount of rainfall associated with a given storm is also projected to increase.¹⁷⁰ This in turn increases the risk of freshwater flooding along the coasts and secondary effects such as landslides. Though scientific confidence in changes in the projected frequency of very strong storms is low to medium, depending on ocean basin, it is important to note that these storms are responsible for the vast majority of damage and mortality associated with tropical storms.

In 2015, Pope Francis released a papal encyclical, Laudato Si'. A papal encyclical is one of the highest forms of communication by the pope and usually deals with some aspect of Catholic teaching. Laudato Si' focused on ecology. In this excerpt, Pope Francis describes the inspiration of his namesake, St. Francis of Assisi.

Saint Francis of Assisi

10. I do not want to write this Encyclical without turning to that attractive and compelling figure, whose name I took as my guide and inspiration when I was elected Bishop of Rome. I believe that Saint Francis is the example par excellence of care for the vulnerable and of an integral ecology lived out joyfully and authentically. He is the patron saint of all who study and work in the area of ecology, and he is also much loved by non-Christians. He was particularly concerned for God's creation and for the poor and outcast. He loved, and was deeply loved for his joy, his generous self-giving, his openheartedness. He was a mystic and a pilgrim who lived in simplicity and in wonderful harmony with God, with others, with nature and with himself. He shows us just how inseparable the bond is between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society, and interior peace.

11. Francis helps us to see that an integral ecology calls for openness to categories which transcend the language of mathematics and biology, and take us to the heart of what it is to be human. Just as happens when we fall in love with someone, whenever he would gaze at the sun, the moon or the smallest of animals, he burst into song, drawing all other creatures into his praise. He communed with all creation, even preaching to the flowers, inviting them "to praise the Lord, just as if they were endowed with reason".^[19] His response to the world around him was so much more than intellectual appreciation or economic calculus, for to him each and every creature was a sister united to him by bonds of affection. That is why he felt called to care for all that exists. His disciple Saint Bonaventure tells us that, "from a reflection on the primary source of all things, filled with even more abundant piety, he would call creatures, no matter how small, by the name of 'brother' or 'sister'".^[20] Such a conviction cannot be written off as naive romanticism, for it affects the choices which determine our behaviour. If we approach nature and the environment without this openness to awe and wonder, if we no longer speak the language of fraternity and beauty in our relationship with the world, our attitude will be that of masters, consumers, ruthless exploiters, unable to set limits on their immediate needs. By contrast, if we feel intimately united with all that exists, then sobriety and care will well up spontaneously. The poverty and austerity of Saint Francis were no mere veneer of asceticism, but something much more radical: a refusal to turn reality into an object simply to be used and controlled.

SOCRATIC SEMINAR SELF EVALUATION

	Yes (2 pts.)	Mostly (1 pt.)	No (0 pts.)	Comments/Reflections
I participated fully in the conversation.				
I used a tone of voice that was respectful and did not attack others.				
I actively listened and connected ideas to those of other speakers.				
I used evidence from the text to support my thoughts				
I remained on topic and engaged.				
I spoke in a loud and clear voice.				
Total Points:				

What was the most interesting thing mentioned during the discussion?	
How did the discussion help me better understand the texts? Explain.	
What lingering questions do I have after the seminar?	

Your Assigned Religion:

1. **Visit the United Nations Initiative's World Religions page at <https://uri.org/kids/world-religions>.** In the space below, provide a brief profile of the religion.

Questions to address include: How and where did it begin? What are its core beliefs? In what area of the world (if any) do most followers live?

2. **Visit the Yale Forum on Religion and Ecology at <https://fore.yale.edu/Climate-Emergency/Climate-Change-Statements-from-World-Religions>.** In the space below, summarize the religion's most recent climate change statement. Questions to address include: What arguments does the statement make in favor of climate activism? How are these arguments tied to the religion's core beliefs? Provide at least one key quotation that illustrates the essence of the statement.

Next, create a poster-sized presentation of the information from this research organizer to display during the gallery walk.

GALLERY WALK: WORLD RELIGIONS RESPOND TO CLIMATE CHANGE

Religious Group Identify and record basic information about the group here.	Group Climate Statement Describe the group's climate statement here.

Based on what you learned from reading the *Laudato Si'* excerpt and other climate statements from religious groups, write your own personal statement about the need for climate action. The statement should reflect not only your own moral beliefs and experiences, but also should include insights as to how the changing climate is affecting your community. Your statement can, but does not need to, reflect your personal religious beliefs.