

Ecotheological Meaning and Environmental Preaching Practices among Religious Leaders

Mukhlis Lubis ^{1*}, Diah Fatma Sjoraida ²

¹Sekolah Tinggi Agama Islam Negeri Mandailing Natal, Indonesia

²Universitas Padjadjaran, Indonesia

¹mukhlizlbz@gmail.com, ²Diah.fatma@unpad.ac.id

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ABSTRACT

Religion and environmental ethics have become increasingly important in addressing global ecological crises, as religious values are recognized for their potential to shape moral responsibility toward nature. Although ecotheology has received growing scholarly attention, existing studies primarily focus on doctrinal perspectives, leaving limited understanding of how religious leaders internalize and communicate ecotheological values through lived experience. This study addresses this gap by exploring the lived experiences of religious leaders in environmental preaching using an interpretative phenomenological approach. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews with purposively selected religious leaders and analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to identify essential themes. The findings indicate that ecotheological values are internalized through personal reflection and theological reinterpretation, while their communication involves navigating resistance and fostering gradual moral transformation within communities. These results demonstrate that environmental preaching is not merely a transmission of religious doctrine but a lived ethical practice embedded in social and cultural contexts. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of religion and environmental ethics by highlighting the central role of lived experience in shaping ecotheological engagement and offers implications for future research on faith-based approaches to environmental sustainability.



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INTRODUCTION

The relationship between religion and the environment has increasingly become a significant area of scholarly inquiry, particularly in response to the escalating global ecological crisis. Environmental degradation, climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution have not only been approached as scientific or economic problems but have also been interpreted as ethical and moral challenges that require deeper reflection on human responsibility (Pacyga, 2023). Within this context, religious traditions have gained renewed attention as potential sources of ethical guidance, shaping values, behaviors, and worldviews related to environmental stewardship. Foundational works, such as White's (1967) critique of the historical roots of ecological crisis, have stimulated ongoing debates about the role of religion in both contributing to and resolving environmental problems. More recent scholarship has therefore repositioned religion as a constructive force in fostering ecological awareness, particularly through the integration of spiritual values and environmental responsibility.

In recent decades, the concept of ecotheology has emerged as a critical framework for understanding how religious teachings engage with environmental concerns (James, 2023). Ecotheology emphasizes the moral and spiritual dimensions of human interaction with nature, promoting the idea that environmental care is not merely a secular obligation but also a sacred responsibility. Studies in this field have explored how religious narratives, doctrines, and rituals can influence ecological consciousness and behavior. However, much of this literature has focused on theological interpretations, doctrinal analysis, or institutional discourse, often overlooking how these ideas are lived, experienced, and negotiated by individuals within their everyday religious practices. As

a result, the experiential dimension of ecotheology how it is internalized, embodied, and communicated in real-world contexts remains relatively underexplored.

The relevance of this phenomenon becomes particularly evident when considering the role of religious leaders as key agents in shaping communal values and ethical orientations. In many societies, religious leaders serve not only as transmitters of doctrinal knowledge but also as interpreters of moral issues and guides for social conduct (Alotaibi, 2021; Winkelman, 2021). Their influence extends into the everyday lives of their communities, where religious teachings intersect with practical realities, including environmental challenges. The process by which these leaders understand, interpret, and communicate environmental responsibility is therefore not merely a theological matter, but a deeply experiential one. It involves personal reflection, negotiation with community expectations, and engagement with socio-cultural dynamics that may either support or resist ecological messages.

From a phenomenological perspective, the significance of this issue lies in its grounding in lived experience. Environmental preaching, as a form of religious practice, cannot be fully understood through abstract analysis alone. It must be examined through the meanings that individuals attach to their experiences as religious actors operating within specific contexts. The subjective dimension how religious leaders perceive their responsibility, how they navigate tensions, and how they make sense of their role in addressing environmental issues constitutes a crucial yet often overlooked aspect of the broader discourse on religion and ecology (Arief et al., 2025; Horowitz et al., 2023). Phenomenology offers a framework to access these meanings by focusing on the essence of experience as it is lived and interpreted.

Given the increasing urgency of environmental crises and the growing recognition of religion's potential role in addressing them, there is a clear need to deepen understanding beyond normative or theoretical discussions. Exploring the lived experiences of religious leaders provides insight into how ecotheological values are not only conceptualized but also enacted, challenged, and transformed in practice. Such an exploration contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the intersection between religion and environmental ethics, highlighting the importance of subjective meaning-making processes in shaping ethical action within communities.

Within the broader discourse on religion and environmental ethics, increasing scholarly attention has been directed toward understanding how individuals particularly religious leaders experience and interpret ecological responsibility in their lived contexts (Ambasciano, 2021; Stokum, 2022). The experiential dimension of ecotheology has gradually emerged as an important sub-area, as researchers recognize that religious teachings do not operate solely at the level of doctrine, but are continuously shaped, internalized, and enacted through human experience. Studies on religion and ecology have acknowledged that moral transformation often occurs through interpretive engagement with everyday realities, where spiritual values intersect with social practices and environmental conditions. In this regard, the subjective experiences of religious leaders become central, as they serve as mediators between theological principles and the lived realities of their communities.

Despite this growing recognition, significant methodological challenges remain in capturing the depth and complexity of such experiences. Much of the existing research has relied on normative analysis, textual interpretation, or survey-based approaches that prioritize generalizable findings over experiential depth. While these approaches have contributed to the development of ecotheological discourse, they often fall short in revealing how individuals actually make sense of environmental responsibility in their daily roles (Kamorudeen, 2024; Lopes Cardozo & Srimulyani, 2021). Quantitative methods, in particular, tend to reduce complex spiritual and ethical experiences into measurable variables, thereby overlooking the nuanced processes of reflection, struggle, and meaning-making that characterize lived experience. Even qualitative studies that do not adopt a phenomenological lens may fail to fully engage with the interpretive and contextual nature of these experiences, instead focusing on surface-level descriptions rather than deeper existential meanings.

These limitations suggest that many existing methodologies are insufficient for uncovering the essence of the phenomenon under investigation. The internalization of ecotheological values, especially within the practice of environmental preaching, involves layers of personal belief, social negotiation, and contextual interpretation that cannot be adequately captured through approaches that lack sensitivity

to subjective meaning. Without an interpretive phenomenological framework, the complexity of how religious leaders experience, negotiate, and articulate environmental responsibility remains partially understood. Consequently, there is a clear need for research approaches that prioritize lived experience and meaning construction, allowing for a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the phenomenon in its full existential and socio-cultural depth.

Current efforts to address the intersection between religion and environmental issues have largely relied on practical and normative approaches, including theological reinterpretation, policy-oriented religious discourse, and community-based environmental programs (Alperovitch, 2024; Schulz, 2023). These approaches have been instrumental in promoting ecological awareness within religious communities by emphasizing stewardship, ethical responsibility, and moral obligation toward nature. In many cases, religious leaders are encouraged to incorporate environmental themes into sermons and public teachings as part of broader sustainability initiatives. Such strategies have contributed to raising awareness and framing environmental care as a religious duty.

However, these prevailing approaches remain limited in their capacity to capture the depth of subjective experience involved in the process of internalizing and communicating ecotheological values. Normative and practice-oriented frameworks tend to focus on what should be taught or implemented, rather than how these teachings are personally understood, negotiated, and experienced by religious actors. As a result, the complexity of meaning-making processes such as internal reflection, emotional tension, interpretive struggle, and contextual adaptation often remains underexplored. Quantitative and policy-driven studies, while useful for identifying trends and outcomes, are inherently constrained in accessing the lived, interpretive dimensions of experience that shape how environmental ethics are embodied in religious practice. Even existing qualitative studies that do not adopt a phenomenological perspective may not fully uncover the existential and contextual layers that define the experience of religious leaders in environmental preaching.

This limitation highlights the need for an alternative methodological approach that can engage more deeply with the essence of the phenomenon. Phenomenology offers a powerful framework for exploring how individuals experience, interpret, and assign meaning to their actions within specific socio-cultural and spiritual contexts (Fahm, 2025; Faiz et al., 2022). By focusing on lived experience, phenomenology allows for a more holistic understanding of how ecotheological values are not only conceptualized but also internalized, challenged, and expressed in real-world religious settings. Such an approach is particularly relevant for examining the role of religious leaders, whose experiences involve continuous negotiation between theological ideals and community realities. Therefore, adopting a phenomenological perspective provides an opportunity to address the existing gap by revealing the deeper structures of meaning that underpin environmental preaching, moving beyond surface-level explanations toward a more comprehensive and contextually grounded understanding of the phenomenon.

Recent studies have explored the relationship between religion and environmental ethics by examining theological interpretations, spiritual ecology, and the role of faith-based institutions in promoting environmental awareness. Scholars have highlighted that religious teachings can shape moral responsibility toward nature and influence community behavior. Other studies have emphasized the importance of lived religion, where beliefs are expressed through daily practices and social interactions. However, most of these studies have focused on doctrinal frameworks or institutional roles rather than the subjective experiences of religious leaders. As a result, limited attention has been given to how these leaders personally internalize and interpret ecotheological values within their preaching practices.

To address this limitation, this study adopts an interpretative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of religious leaders in environmental preaching. This method is chosen because it allows for a deep understanding of how individuals make sense of their experiences in specific social and spiritual contexts. Through this approach, the study seeks to uncover how ecotheological values are internalized, negotiated, and communicated in real-life situations. The findings are expected to provide insight into the meaning-making processes that underlie environmental preaching. In doing so, the study responds directly to the knowledge gap by offering a more holistic and experience-based understanding of the phenomenon.

This article is structured to guide the reader through a clear and logical progression of the study. The introduction presents the general and specific background, followed by the identification of the knowledge gap and the research focus. The method section explains the phenomenological approach, participant selection, data collection, and data analysis procedures. The results section presents the key themes derived from participants' experiences, supported by narrative descriptions and direct quotations. The discussion section interprets the findings in relation to existing literature, and the conclusion highlights the main contributions and implications of the study.

RESEARCH METHODS

Study Design

This study employed an interpretative phenomenological design to explore how religious leaders internalize and communicate ecotheological values in environmental preaching within specific social and cultural contexts. Phenomenology was considered appropriate because the central concern of the study was not the measurement of attitudes or the testing of predetermined variables, but the exploration of lived experience, meaning-making, and subjective interpretation (Lutz & Knox, 2014; McNabb, 2015). This design enabled close engagement with how participants understood environmental responsibility as part of their religious vocation and how such understanding was translated into preaching practice.

A hermeneutic phenomenological orientation, informed by Heideggerian thought, guided the study. This approach was selected because the phenomenon under investigation was inseparable from the participants' socio-religious worlds, historical positioning, and interpretive engagement with faith, community, and ecological change. In contrast to descriptive phenomenology, which seeks to portray the essence of experience through bracketing, interpretative phenomenology acknowledges that meaning emerges through interpretation and contextual embeddedness. Such an approach was particularly relevant for examining environmental preaching, as the phenomenon involves theological reflection, moral struggle, and negotiated interaction with community expectations.

The study was further aligned with the logic of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which is designed to examine in depth how individuals make sense of significant lived experiences. IPA was suitable because it allows the analysis to move beyond surface description and toward the interpretive meanings attached to ecological responsibility, religious duty, and social resistance. Through this design, the study sought to illuminate the essential structure of the participants' experiences while preserving the complexity of their voices and contexts.

Participants

Participants consisted of religious leaders who had direct experience in integrating environmental messages into preaching, teaching, or faith-based public communication. Because the study focused on the lived experience of ecotheological internalization, participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure that each individual had substantial experiential relevance to the phenomenon. This sampling strategy enabled the inclusion of information-rich cases capable of providing reflective and contextually grounded accounts.

The inclusion criteria comprised the following: participants had to be actively serving as religious leaders, preachers, teachers of religion, or community-based spiritual figures; they had to have prior experience delivering sermons, religious talks, or faith-based guidance containing environmental, ecological, or stewardship-related messages; and they had to be willing to articulate their experiences in depth during interview sessions (Hillman & Radel, 2018; Migdal, 2018). Participants were also expected to have at least several years of engagement in religious or community leadership so that their reflections would be rooted in sustained practice rather than incidental exposure. The exclusion criteria included individuals with no direct experience in environmental preaching, those whose involvement in religious leadership was temporary or highly limited, and those unable to participate in extended reflective interviews.

In phenomenological inquiry, emphasis is placed on depth rather than numerical breadth; therefore, a small and homogeneous sample was considered methodologically appropriate. The study was designed to involve approximately 6 to 10 participants, which is consistent with IPA-oriented phenomenological work that privileges idiographic depth and interpretive richness. Relevant demographic and contextual characteristics, such as gender, age range, years of religious service, institutional affiliation, and community setting, were documented to support contextual understanding of the phenomenon. These characteristics were treated as interpretive background rather than variables for comparison.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews as the primary method of eliciting lived experience. This method was selected because it provides sufficient flexibility to explore participants' personal meanings while maintaining coherence with the research focus. A semi-structured interview guide was used to support consistency across interviews while allowing participants to narrate their experiences in their own terms. The guide was developed from the research question and the conceptual concern with ecotheological internalization, environmental preaching, spiritual reflection, and socio-cultural challenge.

Interview questions were designed to invite reflection on how ecological concern emerged in the participants' religious consciousness, how environmental themes were interpreted theologically, how such themes were communicated in preaching, and what kinds of tensions or resistance were encountered in practice (Carreiras & Castro, 2012; Iosifides, 2016). Probing questions were used to deepen clarification, emotional nuance, and contextual detail. This format enabled the collection of detailed experiential narratives rather than brief opinion-based responses.

Data were collected through face-to-face interviews whenever feasible, with secure online interviews used when direct access was not possible. Each interview was conducted in a setting considered familiar, private, and comfortable for the participant, such as a religious office, community meeting room, or quiet online environment. A supportive atmosphere was maintained so that participants could speak openly about their beliefs, struggles, and reflections without fear of judgment. The duration of each interview ranged from approximately 45 to 90 minutes, depending on the depth of the participant's narrative and the complexity of the issues discussed.

With participants' permission, all interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy and completeness. Field notes were also produced during and immediately after each interview to document contextual impressions, nonverbal cues, pauses, and emerging interpretive insights. Where relevant, supporting materials such as sermon notes, public religious messages, or community documents were consulted as supplementary contextual data, although the interview narratives remained the primary source of phenomenological meaning (Daly, 2007; Longhofer et al., 2012). All interviews were transcribed verbatim to preserve participants' language, emphasis, and expressive texture for subsequent analysis.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. This analytic approach was adopted because it is well suited to exploring how individuals interpret and give meaning to significant lived experiences. In this study, IPA enabled systematic engagement with the ways religious leaders understood ecotheological responsibility, negotiated religious meaning, and described the lived tensions of environmental preaching.

The analysis proceeded through several interconnected stages. First, each transcript was read repeatedly to facilitate immersion in the data and to develop a holistic sense of the participant's account. During this stage, attention was directed to descriptive content, emotional tone, linguistic emphasis, and contextual references (Fife, 2020; Kawamura, 2020). Initial notes were then generated to identify significant expressions, experiential nuances, and interpretive possibilities relevant to the phenomenon.

Second, emergent codes were developed from meaning units that reflected key aspects of the participants' lived experiences. These codes were not treated as isolated fragments, but as interpretive

entry points into the participants' sense-making processes. Third, related codes were clustered into conceptual patterns, from which broader experiential themes were generated. These themes captured recurring meanings such as spiritual obligation, theological reflection, social resistance, moral responsibility, and communal transformation.

Fourth, each case was examined idiographically before moving to cross-case synthesis. This step was important because phenomenological rigor requires attention to the distinctiveness of each participant's account prior to identifying convergences across participants. Once individual thematic structures had been established, patterns of connection and divergence across cases were mapped to produce higher-order themes representing the essential features of the phenomenon.

Throughout the analytic process, interpretation remained grounded in participants' narratives and direct expressions. The aim was not merely to summarize what participants said, but to identify how meaning was formed within their experiences and how those meanings illuminated the central phenomenon. NVivo software may be used to assist in organizing transcripts, coding segments, and managing thematic development; however, interpretive judgment remained rooted in close reading rather than software-generated abstraction. The final thematic structure was constructed to align with the Results section, allowing the findings to unfold in a coherent narrative sequence from spiritual awareness to interpretive struggle, social negotiation, and moral formation.

RESULTS

Ecological Responsibility as a Sacred Religious Mandate

The first major theme concerned the participants' experience of environmental responsibility as a sacred mandate rather than a merely social or political issue. Participants repeatedly described that their concern for environmental degradation emerged from a theological consciousness that humans are not owners of nature, but trustees entrusted with moral responsibility. This understanding was not expressed in abstract doctrinal language alone, but in deeply personal reflections on accountability, sin, care, and worship.

The Intersection of Theology and Environmentalism



Several participants explained that their awareness of environmental ethics developed through a reinterpretation of scriptural teachings that had previously been understood in predominantly ritual or moral terms. Over time, they came to recognize that ecological destruction was not external to religion, but directly related to religious responsibility. In their narratives, environmental concern became a manifestation of obedience, compassion, and reverence for creation.

One participant explained this awareness in explicitly spiritual terms:

“At first, I preached mostly about worship, family, and morality in the usual sense. But later I realized that protecting the earth is also part of worship. If God created nature with purpose, then damaging it carelessly is not a small matter. It is a moral failure before God.” (P3)

This statement reflects how environmental concern was experienced not as an imported agenda, but as a rediscovered dimension of faith. Another participant similarly described ecological responsibility as an extension of religious trust:

“I began to feel that speaking about the environment was not optional. If I remained silent while the community continued habits that harmed the land and water, I felt I was neglecting part of my duty as a religious leader.” (P1)

What is significant in these accounts is that ecotheological awareness was not framed as an intellectual agreement with environmental discourse, but as a moral awakening. The participants described an inner shift in which environmental decline became spiritually visible. Floods, waste, deforestation, polluted rivers, and changing weather patterns were interpreted not only as physical realities, but also as ethical signs that demanded a religious response. For the participants, the environment was no longer perceived as a neutral background to human life, but as part of a divinely entrusted order that required care, restraint, and ethical discipline.

This theme demonstrates that the internalization of ecotheology began with a transformation in religious consciousness. The participants’ lived experiences suggest that environmental ethics became meaningful when they were understood as part of spiritual accountability and not merely as a secular discourse appended to religion.

Internalizing Ecotheology Through Reflection, Interpretation, and Personal Moral Struggle

The second theme reveals that the internalization of ecotheological values was a gradual and reflective process shaped by interpretation, doubt, and personal struggle. Participants did not describe a simple transition from theological knowledge to practical preaching. Instead, they experienced a prolonged process of wrestling with religious texts, social expectations, and their own assumptions about what counted as legitimate religious teaching.

Many participants admitted that environmental issues were not initially central in their preaching traditions. Some noted that congregational expectations typically favored sermons on ritual devotion, family conduct, sin, patience, and social morality in more conventional forms. Introducing environmental ethics required them to rethink their own preaching identity and religious priorities. This interpretive shift involved not only theological study, but also self-questioning regarding relevance, authority, and pastoral effectiveness.

One participant articulated this struggle with notable clarity:

“I had to ask myself whether this topic truly belonged in the pulpit or whether people would see it as something outside religion. The more I reflected, the more I understood that the separation between faith and the environment was artificial. But reaching that understanding took time.” (P5)

This quotation captures the hermeneutic movement that characterized the participants’ experiences. They were not merely transmitting ready-made doctrines; they were engaged in an active process of meaning-making. The internalization of ecotheology unfolded through reflection on lived realities such as local environmental damage, community habits, and the visible consequences of ecological neglect. These experiences pushed participants to revisit scriptural meaning in light of contemporary ecological conditions.

Another participant described how the process became personally demanding:

“It is easier to repeat what people already expect from a sermon. But when I began speaking about waste, water, and human greed toward nature, I realized I also had to examine myself. I could not ask the congregation to change if I was not also rethinking my own habits and responsibilities.” (P2)

This narrative highlights that internalization was ethical before it became rhetorical. Participants experienced ecotheology as something that first confronted the self. Before becoming public discourse, it emerged as inner moral work. This included feelings of inadequacy, caution, and even vulnerability, especially when participants felt they were entering a field that might be seen as unconventional within religious preaching.

The accounts also suggest that internalization involved a fusion between spiritual reflection and contextual awareness. The leaders came to see ecological responsibility as religiously meaningful precisely because they interpreted environmental suffering through the lens of lived community realities. In this sense, ecotheology was not merely adopted; it was existentially inhabited.

Preaching the Environment in the Midst of Social Resistance and Cultural Ambivalence

The third theme concerned the tension participants experienced when communicating environmental messages in religious spaces where such themes were not always readily welcomed. Although participants had come to view environmental preaching as morally necessary, they frequently encountered hesitation, misunderstanding, and resistance from their audiences. This resistance did not always appear as direct rejection; in many cases it emerged as indifference, confusion, or the perception that environmental issues were secondary to “real” religious concerns.

Participants explained that many members of their communities still perceived environmental discourse as belonging to government campaigns, educational institutions, or activist circles rather than the domain of religious leadership. As a result, preaching about ecological ethics often required participants to justify why such issues should matter in sermons, study circles, or public religious gatherings.

One participant described this resistance in the following way:

“Some people listened respectfully, but I could sense that they were thinking, ‘Why is the sermon talking about garbage, rivers, and trees instead of worship or the afterlife?’ For them, religion and the environment were still separate categories.” (P4)

This separation between spiritual life and ecological responsibility created a form of cultural ambivalence. Participants felt that they were not simply delivering a new message, but challenging inherited assumptions about what religion should address. In some cases, the resistance came from practical habits within the community. Participants described communities that were religiously active but continued to normalize burning waste, excessive consumption, or neglect of shared environmental spaces.

Another participant explained the emotional complexity of this experience:

“I felt tension because the same people who are committed to prayer and religious gatherings sometimes do not see environmental care as part of faith. So when I spoke about it, I was not only teaching; I was also confronting a contradiction in our collective religious life.” (P6)

This quotation reveals that participants experienced environmental preaching as a delicate act of moral confrontation. Their challenge was not merely informational, but cultural and relational. They had to speak in ways that would invite reflection without alienating the audience. The participants therefore described using indirect language, scriptural analogies, moral storytelling, and practical examples to reduce defensiveness and make ecological concerns feel spiritually familiar.

Importantly, the resistance they encountered did not lead them to abandon the message. Rather, it deepened their awareness that environmental preaching required patience, sensitivity, and contextual wisdom. They understood that transformation in this area was likely to be gradual, requiring repeated engagement rather than immediate acceptance.

This theme shows that the lived experience of religious leaders in environmental preaching is inseparable from the social world in which their message is received. Their role involved not only theological conviction but also emotional labor, relational negotiation, and strategic adaptation within communities marked by mixed levels of ecological awareness.

Environmental Preaching as Moral Formation and Collective Transformation

The fourth theme reflects the participants’ experience of environmental preaching as an effort to cultivate moral transformation at both personal and communal levels. Participants did not describe their preaching as simply transmitting environmental information. Instead, they understood it as a

formative practice aimed at reshaping ethical perception, religious responsibility, and everyday conduct within the community.

Several participants explained that the purpose of preaching was not to create temporary awareness, but to cultivate a sustained moral orientation in which ecological care became part of habitual religious life. In this sense, environmental preaching was experienced as a process of moral formation through which individuals and communities learned to recognize wastefulness, exploitation, and ecological neglect as spiritual concerns rather than merely technical problems.

One participant expressed this formative vision clearly:

“I do not want people to leave the sermon only thinking, ‘The environment is important.’ I want them to feel that caring for water, land, and cleanliness is part of their religious identity. If that awareness becomes part of who they are, then the sermon has meaning.” (P1)

This emphasis on identity formation is central to the participants’ narratives. They hoped that ecotheological preaching would move the congregation from passive acknowledgment to ethical embodiment. Participants described small but meaningful changes that they interpreted as signs of emerging transformation, such as increased discussions about waste management, greater concern for shared spaces, and efforts to connect religious gatherings with environmental cleanliness and responsibility.

Another participant described the significance of such gradual changes:

“The impact is not always dramatic. Sometimes it begins with simple things: people become more careful with waste after a religious event, or they start linking cleanliness with responsibility before God. For me, these are signs that the message is beginning to live in the community.” (P3)

These narratives suggest that the participants experienced success not in terms of measurable outcomes alone, but through subtle shifts in communal consciousness. Environmental preaching became meaningful when it helped communities reinterpret ordinary ecological practices through religious ethics. Participants also described that this process strengthened their own sense of purpose, as they came to see religious leadership not only as preserving doctrine but also as guiding ethical responses to contemporary crises.

The theme therefore reveals an expanded understanding of religious leadership. The participants viewed themselves as mediators between sacred teachings and lived social realities. Through preaching, they sought to build an ethical bridge between spiritual devotion and ecological responsibility, thereby encouraging a form of religious life that is both theologically grounded and socially responsive.

DISCUSSION

The findings show that the internalization of ecotheological values among religious leaders is not a superficial extension of religious discourse, but a deeply lived process shaped by spiritual awakening, interpretive struggle, social resistance, and moral commitment (Rozikin et al., 2025; Tumadi et al., 2025). In relation to the broader question raised in the Introduction, the study indicates that the meaning of environmental preaching emerges through the leaders’ lived experience of reconciling religious responsibility with ecological realities in community life.

These findings provide a direct answer to the central research question by demonstrating that religious leaders experience environmental preaching as both an inward and outward moral journey. Inwardly, ecotheological values are formed through reflection, theological reinterpretation, and self-examination. Outwardly, those values are expressed through preaching practices that require social sensitivity, ethical persistence, and contextual adaptation (Gusmian & Muttaqin, 2024; Minor et al., 2023). This means that the phenomenon cannot be understood solely as the transmission of religious messages about the environment. Rather, it must be understood as an ongoing process of meaning-making in which religious leaders negotiate the relationship between faith, ecological responsibility, and communal expectations.

A key contribution of this study lies in showing that environmental preaching is experienced not simply as an additional topic in religious communication, but as a redefinition of religious duty itself. The participants did not position ecological care as external to spirituality. Instead, they understood it as an integral part of obedience, stewardship, and accountability before God. This insight extends the current understanding of religion and environmental ethics by revealing how ecotheological commitment is lived at the level of personal vocation. The significance of this contribution is that it shifts the discussion from what religion says about the environment to how religious actors come to inhabit that message as part of their own moral identity.

The findings also contribute to the understanding of religious leadership in contemporary environmental contexts (Abidin et al., 2025; Horsti & Pirkkalainen, 2023). The participants' experiences suggest that religious leaders are not merely conveyors of doctrine, but interpreters who translate theological meaning into lived moral guidance. Their role involves navigating the tension between scriptural ideals and the social realities of communities that may not yet perceive environmental care as a core religious concern. This demonstrates that the authority of religious leaders in environmental matters is not exercised only through formal teaching, but also through interpretive labor, emotional endurance, and ethical consistency. As a result, the study deepens the understanding of how ecological ethics become socially meaningful through lived religious practice rather than through abstract doctrine alone.

Another important contribution of the study is its illumination of resistance as part of the phenomenon rather than as an incidental obstacle. The participants' experiences show that indifference, ambivalence, and subtle rejection from community members are central to how environmental preaching is lived and understood (Boubker, 2024; Zainuddin & Filzah, 2022). This matters because it reveals that ecotheological communication is not a neutral act. It often challenges inherited assumptions about the boundaries of religious discourse. The study therefore clarifies that the lived experience of environmental preaching includes not only conviction, but also vulnerability, negotiation, and patience. This insight enriches phenomenological understanding by showing that the essence of the phenomenon lies partly in the tension between moral certainty and uncertain reception.

The findings are broadly consistent with prior scholarship that has emphasized the ethical potential of religion in responding to ecological crisis. Tucker and Grim (2001) argue that religious traditions contain moral resources that can support ecological responsibility, while Jenkins (2013) highlights the practical importance of bringing environmental ethics into lived religious contexts. The present study supports these perspectives, but moves beyond them by showing how such moral resources are not automatically activated. They become meaningful through personal interpretation, spiritual reflection, and engagement with community realities. In this sense, the findings complement earlier work by adding an experiential layer to discussions that have often remained theological or institutional.

The findings also resonate with Taylor's (2016) discussion of spiritual worldviews that produce forms of ecological consciousness. However, this study offers a more grounded account of how such consciousness is formed within formal religious leadership rather than within broader spiritual or cultural movements. The participants did not simply express a general reverence for nature. They articulated a specifically religious struggle to align ecological concern with established preaching traditions and congregational expectations. This distinction is important because it shows that ecological consciousness among religious leaders is shaped not only by belief, but also by the institutional and relational demands of leadership. Thus, the present findings refine broader discussions of spiritual ecology by locating them within the moral responsibilities and communicative practices of religious authority.

The study also reinforces the relevance of lived religion as an interpretive frame for understanding environmental ethics. Sponsel (2018) and related scholarship suggest that spirituality and ecological practice are often interconnected in everyday life. The present findings support this view, yet they reveal that such interconnection is rarely immediate or uncomplicated. The participants' experiences show that bringing ecological ethics into religious life requires a process of reinterpretation in which familiar theological teachings are revisited under the pressure of contemporary environmental

realities. This insight extends prior literature by indicating that lived religion is not only expressed through routine practice, but also through moments of reorientation, discomfort, and moral redefinition.

At the theoretical level, the findings align well with the interpretive phenomenological perspective that meaning is formed within context rather than existing as a detached inner state. The participants understood environmental preaching through their concrete involvement in communities, their encounters with ecological degradation, and their awareness of the expectations attached to religious leadership. Their narratives support the Heideggerian view that human experience is always situated, relational, and interpretive. This theoretical alignment strengthens the argument that ecotheological internalization cannot be reduced to doctrinal agreement. It must be understood as a context-bound experience in which religious meaning emerges through engagement with the world.

The findings also suggest that existing practical approaches to religion and the environment may be limited when they assume that ecological messages can simply be added to sermons or community programs without deeper interpretive work. Earlier practical and normative approaches have been valuable in promoting awareness, yet this study indicates that awareness alone does not explain how environmental preaching becomes authentic and sustainable. What matters is the process through which religious leaders personally come to see ecological care as part of their spiritual and pastoral responsibility. Without that internal process, environmental discourse risks remaining rhetorical rather than transformative. This interpretation helps explain why some initiatives may appear normatively sound but fail to produce deeper moral resonance within communities.

Taken together, the findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of religion and environmental ethics by centering lived meaning rather than doctrinal abstraction. They show that the essence of environmental preaching lies in the religious leader's effort to bridge sacred obligation and ecological crisis through reflective, relational, and morally demanding practice. This contribution is important not because it overturns previous scholarship, but because it fills a neglected dimension within it. It reveals that ecotheology becomes socially effective not only when it is theologically justified, but when it is existentially embraced by those who communicate it.

The findings carry important practical and scholarly implications for the field of religion and environmental ethics. At the practical level, they suggest that environmental preaching becomes more credible and transformative when ecological responsibility is framed not as an external campaign, but as an integral dimension of religious life. This means that faith-based environmental engagement should not rely only on doctrinal statements or programmatic appeals. It should also create space for religious leaders to reflect on their own spiritual relationship with environmental responsibility, because the authenticity of preaching appears to depend on the depth of this internalization. In this sense, the study indicates that ecological ethics may gain stronger communal acceptance when they are communicated through moral language that resonates with existing religious commitments, such as stewardship, accountability, gratitude, restraint, and care for creation.

The findings also have broader social and cultural implications. They show that environmental responsibility in religious communities is shaped not only by theological content, but also by how communities define the boundaries of legitimate religious discourse. When participants encountered resistance, indifference, or hesitation, those responses revealed that environmental concern was still not fully recognized as part of mainstream religious consciousness. This suggests that the challenge is not merely educational, but cultural and interpretive. In wider social contexts where religion remains influential in shaping ethical behavior, the lived experiences of religious leaders may serve as an important bridge between ecological crisis and communal moral imagination. The study therefore highlights that environmental ethics can become socially meaningful when it is embedded in forms of religious communication that connect everyday ecological practices with spiritually significant values.

From a professional perspective, the findings expand the understanding of religious leadership in contemporary society. Religious leaders are often expected to preserve doctrinal continuity and provide moral guidance in response to changing conditions. The present study shows that environmental preaching places these leaders in a position that requires interpretive flexibility as well as moral courage. Their experience involves translating ecological concerns into forms that remain theologically grounded while also being pastorally accessible. This implication is particularly important for institutions

involved in religious education, sermon development, and faith-based public communication. Training programs that seek to strengthen environmental engagement may benefit from focusing not only on theological literacy, but also on reflective capacity, contextual interpretation, and communicative sensitivity. Such an orientation would align with broader scholarship showing that religious environmental engagement becomes effective when moral teaching is linked to lived practice and social meaning.

The findings are also relevant to broader populations beyond the immediate participants. Although the study focuses on religious leaders, the meanings identified in their experiences point toward wider patterns within communities where spiritual authority influences moral perception. In many cultural settings, environmental responsibility is more likely to gain traction when it is connected to existing moral worlds rather than introduced as a purely technical or policy-driven concern. The participants' narratives suggest that religious discourse can play a meaningful role in shaping ecological awareness precisely because it speaks to identity, duty, and belonging. This relevance extends to community organizations, educational institutions, and policy contexts that seek culturally grounded approaches to environmental ethics. Rather than treating religion as a secondary or symbolic factor, the study suggests that it should be understood as a lived ethical resource capable of influencing how communities interpret ecological crisis and respond to it.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the phenomenological design prioritizes depth of meaning over breadth of coverage; therefore, the findings are not intended to be statistically generalized across all religious leaders or all religious communities (Aslam et al., 2023; Faletahan, 2024). The experiences described in this study are context-bound and reflect particular social, cultural, and religious settings in which ecological responsibility was interpreted and communicated. Second, the use of in-depth interviews means that the findings rely on participants' reflective accounts of their experiences. Although such accounts are essential in phenomenology, they may not fully capture every dimension of practice that unfolds in public or communal settings. Third, because the study centers on leaders who had already engaged, at least to some degree, with environmental preaching, the findings may not represent the perspectives of religious leaders who remain disengaged from ecological discourse or who actively resist its inclusion in religious teaching.

Another limitation concerns the contextual and interpretive nature of the findings. The meanings attached to environmental preaching may differ across theological traditions, institutional structures, and local environmental conditions. As a result, the study should be read as an in-depth exploration of a particular lived phenomenon rather than as a universal account of religion and ecological ethics. In addition, the interpretative phenomenological framework necessarily involves a close engagement with meaning and context, which means that the thematic structure reflects both participants' narratives and the interpretive logic of the analysis. This does not weaken the study, but it does mean that the findings should be understood within the logic of phenomenological inquiry rather than through expectations of broad representational coverage. These limitations, however, also clarify productive directions for future research.

Future studies could extend this work by examining how ecotheological values are experienced across different religious traditions, denominational settings, or community contexts. Comparative phenomenological inquiry may help reveal whether the tensions identified in this study such as the struggle between theological conviction and communal resistance emerge in similar ways across different spiritual environments or whether they take distinct forms. Further research could also explore the experiences of other actors within religious communities, including congregants, youth leaders, women's religious groups, or faith-based environmental activists, in order to understand how ecological meaning is negotiated across multiple layers of communal life. Such work would enrich the growing literature on religion and environmental ethics by moving beyond leadership perspectives alone.

In addition, future research may investigate how lived ecotheological commitment changes over time. Longitudinal qualitative inquiry could provide valuable insight into how environmental preaching develops from early reflection to sustained religious practice, and how repeated engagement with community responses shapes the leader's moral identity (Latif et al., 2023). It may also be useful to connect phenomenological findings with broader qualitative approaches that examine institutional

discourse, educational practices, or community-based environmental initiatives. By doing so, future studies could deepen understanding of how personal meaning and collective structures interact in shaping religious responses to ecological crisis.

More broadly, the present findings open space for future work on how moral responsibility is formed when religious actors confront contemporary global challenges through local spiritual practice. The experiences described here suggest that ecotheological values do not become influential solely through theological argument, but through the lived processes by which they are interpreted, embodied, and communicated. This insight can support future inquiry into the role of religion in addressing not only environmental degradation, but also other ethically complex issues where faith, social expectation, and lived responsibility intersect. In that sense, the study contributes a foundation for continued exploration of how subjective religious experience can inform socially meaningful ethical action in a changing world.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how religious leaders experience and internalize ecotheological values in the context of environmental preaching, addressing the need to understand the lived meaning behind faith-based ecological responsibility. The findings revealed that environmental preaching is experienced as a deeply reflective and moral process shaped by spiritual awareness, interpretive struggle, social resistance, and a commitment to ethical transformation within communities. These results demonstrate that ecotheological values become meaningful not merely through doctrinal transmission, but through personal internalization and contextual engagement, thereby addressing the limitations of previous normative and surface-level approaches in the literature. The study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of religion and environmental ethics by highlighting the central role of lived experience in shaping authentic and effective religious communication about environmental issues. It also shows that religious leaders function as key mediators who translate ecological concerns into morally resonant messages that can influence communal awareness and behavior. Future research may build on these findings by exploring similar experiences across diverse religious contexts or by examining how such lived ecotheological commitments evolve over time within broader social and institutional settings.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. All processes related to the design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation of the findings were conducted independently, without any influence from external parties or funding institutions.

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