



# Ecotheology as an Academic Field

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## Abstract

*This article examines ecotheology as an academic subject. Building on a previous analysis of ecotheological curricula published in *Sacred Earth: Ecotheology, Sustainability and Education* (Bredal-Tomren, 2026), it shifts attention from formal course descriptions to the selfunderstanding of scholars working within the field. The main empirical material consists of a digital survey conducted in April 2026 among researchers affiliated with the European Christian Ecotheology Research Network (ECeRN). The findings point to a substantial degree of conceptual convergence regarding ecotheology's normative, interdisciplinary and practiceoriented character, alongside considerable variation in institutional location and organisational form. Read in dialogue with prominent ecotheology scholars' and Arne Næss's notion of ecosophy, the material suggests that ecotheology is best approached not as a clearly bounded subdiscipline but as an integrative theological field oriented towards ecological sustainability and social transformation.*

**Keywords:** ecotheology; sustainability; theological education; academic fields; ecosophy.



## Introduction: From curricular analysis to scholarly selfunderstanding

In a chapter published in *Sacred Earth: Ecotheology, Sustainability and Education* (2026), the articulation of ecotheology in formal curricula at selected theological institutions in Norway is analysed.<sup>1</sup> That study suggested that ecotheology is rarely established as a stable, standalone subject. More commonly, it appears as a crosscutting field, situated at the intersection of systematic theology, biblical studies, practical theology and sustainability-oriented educational frameworks. Although the institutions examined in the 2026 study differed in theological emphasis and pedagogical approach, they shared a concern to respond meaningfully, within theological education, to the ecological crisis.

The present article continues this line of enquiry, though from a different angle. Rather than asking how ecotheology is presented in curricular documents, attention is here directed towards how the field is understood by scholars who teach and conduct research within it. In this sense, the article moves from questions of institutional and pedagogical articulation to questions of scholarly selfunderstanding.

This shift is significant. Curricula provide insight into institutional priorities and structural constraints, but they do not fully capture how a field is conceptualised by those who shape it intellectually. To access this level of reflection, the article draws on empirical material from an international survey conducted among scholars affiliated with ecotheological research networks. By placing this material at the centre of the analysis, the article seeks to contribute to a more grounded understanding of ecotheology as an academic field in formation.

The discussion is guided by three interrelated questions:

1. How do scholars working in ecotheology describe the field's content and purpose?
2. How is ecotheology currently positioned within higher education?
3. To what extent may ecotheology be understood as an integrative, normative academic field rather than as a discrete discipline?

For the sake of clarity, it should be stated that I have used an AI assisted language tool (Microsoft Copilot) for linguistic revision and improvement

1 Bredal-Tomren, T. S. (2026). Curricula for ecotheology and theological education – case studies from Norway. I T. S. Bredal-Tomren & A. J. Lund (eds.), *Sacred Earth, Shared Futures: Sustainability Education and Ecotheology across Cultures*. Cappelen Damm Akademisk. <https://doi.org/10.23865/cdf.295.ch3> License: CC-BY-NC-NDT *Sustainability and Education*, ed. Tom Sverre Bredal Tomren (Oslo: Cappelen Damm Akademisk, 2026), 39-64.



of clarity. All scholarly content, interpretation, and argumentation remain mine.

## Ecotheology as an emerging academic field

The etymological roots of the term Ecotheology indicate that the field concerns the study of the relationship between God and the household:

The term ecotheology is based on three small Greek words. “Eco” derives from the word *oikos*, meaning house. “Theo” means God. “Logy” is most often translated as doctrine or study. Ecotheology can therefore be translated as the study or doctrine of God’s household. God’s household is here understood as the whole of creation, or nature in its entirety.<sup>2</sup>

Ecotheology may thus be described as theology concerned with the relationship between God and the biosphere. A very basic definition of ecotheology may be something akin to that of Lora Stone, who defines it as “a theological approach that combines the fields of theology and ecology.”<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Ernst M. Conradie gives as his basic definition “a theological movement reflecting on Christian responses to ecological destruction,”<sup>4</sup> and Celia Deane-Drummond postulates that “[e]cotheologists argue that theology should take ecology ... as a key context for theological reflection.”<sup>5</sup> Even more broadly, Pihkala gives as a definition “religious thought and action concerning the human-nature relationship.”<sup>6</sup>

While there are some nuances in how these definitions conceptualize ecotheology as an academic discipline, what they have in common is that ecotheology happens at the intersection of ecology and theology, which is a reiteration that “ecotheology” etymologically derives from these two terms.<sup>7</sup> In many respects, this definition of ecotheology does capture its essential character as being “a very broad movement that encompasses

2 Tom Sverre Tomren, «Oppbruddsteologi – en ny forståelse av tid og prosess,» i *Grønn postill: Økoteologi og kirkehverdag*, red. Tomren og Hans Jürgen Schorre (Oslo: Verbum, 2001), 79.

3 Lora Stone, *Religion and Environmentalism: Exploring the Issues*, Religion in Politics and Society Today, (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-CLIO, 2020), 43.

4 Ernst M. Conradie, “Ecotheology,” in *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*, ed. Brendan N. Wolfe et al. (University of St. Andrews, 2023). <https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/Ecotheology>.

5 *Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. Ian A. McFarland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 156. Celia Deane-Drummond, “Ecotheology,” in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. Ian A. McFarland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 156.

6 Panu Pihkala, “Rediscovery of Early Twentieth-Century Ecotheology,” *Open Theology* 2, nr. 1 (2016): 269–282, <https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2016-0023>.

7 This is perhaps even more explicit in the related term “ecological theology”.



virtually every distinctive class of theology,” and for that reason an opened definition may be the most accurate means of conveying the field’s scope and substance. However, for the purposes of this study, it is necessary to have a more accurate description of what is considered to be the purpose of ecotheology as an academic discipline, and how it is positioned within the field.

As can be seen above, ecotheology has been variously defined, most of which emphasize the intersection of ecology and theology. However, there are theologians who have described ecotheology strictly with a Christian framework, of which Susan Power Bratton’s and Panu Pikhala’s definitions are worth mentioning. In 2002 Bratton expressed:

Ecotheology, unlike abstract cosmology or theology of nature, guides Christian interaction with the environment. Ecotheology addresses the value of other creatures and God’s intent for the cosmos. Ecotheology also develops ethical models that consider politics, economics, and the practical issues surrounding human need.<sup>8</sup>

Panu Pikhala says:

Ecotheology deals with questions of the proper relationship between humans and the rest of nature in the light of Christian beliefs, and the study of ecotheology analyzes different views of these relationships. Ecotheologies are often normative: they argue for a particular point of view. Based on a certain belief system, a certain ethical demand is proposed. Normative ecotheology often has a two-directional aim: to make a case for the relevance of ecotheology to Christian theology and for the relevance of Christianity to environmentalism.<sup>9</sup>

While both Bratton and Pikhala define ecotheology primarily as a form of Christian theology, I employ the term more broadly, using it to refer to scholars of religion across a wide range of religious traditions. *Ecotheology is theology developed to motivate religious individuals and institutions to engage in ecological sustainability. Ecotheology includes systematic theology, environmental ethics, practical theology and environmental politics. The concept is normative and interdisciplinary.*<sup>10</sup>

8 Susan Power Bratton, quoted in Tom Sverre Bredal- Tomren, *Kyrkje, miljø og berekraft* (Steinkjer: Embla Akademisk, 2019), 11.

9 Pikhala, “Rediscovery,” 269.

10 Bredal Tomren, *Kyrkje, miljø og berekraft*, 32.



## **A brief discussion of the concept**

From early debates prompted by Lynn White's critique of Christian anthropocentrism, the field has grown to encompass doctrinal theology, ethics, biblical interpretation, liturgy, ecclesial practice and public theology. The ecological crisis has thus become not merely a topic within theology, but a critical lens through which theological assumptions themselves are reassessed.

A defining feature of ecotheology has been its dual orientation. On the one hand, ecotheological reflection engages classical theological questions concerning God, creation and humanity. On the other, it remains oriented towards concrete ecological challenges and their ethical, social and political implications. This tension between contemplation and engagement has shaped both the content of ecotheological scholarship and its uneven institutional location within theology.

Ecotheology, therefore, has been described both as a distinct discipline and as a broader trend within theology. This characterization highlights the field's dynamism and its resistance to disciplinary closure. Such resistance does not imply conceptual vagueness. Rather, it reflects ecotheology's selfunderstanding as an integrative and critical perspective cutting across established subdisciplines. Attempts to stabilise ecotheology as a clearly bounded field risk obscuring the very features that have driven its development: responsiveness to ecological urgency, methodological openness and normative engagement.

This tension becomes especially visible in discussions of normativity. Unlike many thematic areas within theology, ecotheology rarely confines itself to descriptive analysis alone. Instead, it proceeds from the assumption that theological reflection on creation necessarily entails ethical responsibility and practical consequences. The central question is therefore not whether ecotheology is normative, but how such normativity is articulated, justified and institutionally embedded without collapsing into activism or losing scholarly rigour.

Regional and contextual variation further complicates attempts at disciplinary consolidation. Ecotheology takes different forms depending on ecclesial traditions, educational structures and sociopolitical contexts. In some regions it has developed primarily within churchbased initiatives and public theology; in others it has been anchored more firmly in systematic theology or environmental ethics. This plurality suggests that ecotheology's coherence lies less in institutional form than in shared concerns and commitments.



Within the European context, concerns that later came to be articulated as ecotheology were already thematised before the turn of the millennium and have since been developed further in both scholarly and pedagogical work. Ecotheology did not emerge suddenly as a reaction to recent climate discourse; rather, it has developed through sustained theological engagement with questions of creation, responsibility, and sustainability.

As the concept of ecotheology has become more firmly established, and as research conferences and scholarly networks working on the theme have developed, ecotheology has found its way into higher education, particularly within theological education, where it is increasingly offered as a distinct subject.

The present study does not seek to adjudicate between competing models of disciplinary organisation. Rather, it asks how scholars currently working within ecotheology themselves understand the field they inhabit, and how these understandings relate to patterns of institutionalisation and teaching. While previous scholarship has analysed ecotheology primarily through doctrinal, ethical or curricular lenses, this article contributes an empirically grounded analysis of how ecotheology is currently understood by its practitioners as an academic field.

## **Methodology, empirical material and research context**

The primary empirical material for this study consists of a digital survey entitled “*Ecotheology – What is your reflection*”. The survey was conducted in April 2026 using an online survey platform and distributed to scholars who had participated in the conference *Ecotheology as an Academic Subject*, organised by the European Christian Ecotheology Research Network (ECErN) in Stavanger in November 2025.

ECErN is a research-oriented network that brings together scholars engaged in ecotheological research and teaching, with particular attention to theology, ecology, ethics and sustainability. The network may be understood as a scholarly consolidation of earlier European initiatives, most notably the European Christian Environmental Network (ECEN), founded in 1999, and the Ecothee conferences and publication series hosted by the Orthodox Academy of Crete since 2008. While ECEN functioned primarily as a churchbased and politically oriented network, and Ecothee as an academic platform, ECErN has emerged with a clearer focus on research, higher education and disciplinary reflection.



At present, ECErN brings together approximately seventy to eighty scholars, primarily based in Europe but with significant connections to academic and ecclesial contexts in Africa, the Middle East and North America.

Sixteen respondents completed the survey, representing at least thirteen countries and seventeen distinct institutions. The survey consisted of eight questions: five structured questions concerning institutional affiliation, disciplinary placement, educational level and organisational form, and three openended questions inviting respondents to define ecotheology and to reflect on its future. Quantitative responses were presented descriptively in tables, while qualitative responses were analysed thematically. The survey did not aim at statistical generalisation but offered an analytically meaningful snapshot of scholarly self-understanding within a specific research community.

## **Ecotheology in academic institutions: patterns and perceptions**

### **INSTITUTIONAL PRESENCE**

Fewer than half of the respondents reported that ecotheology existed as a separate subject at their institution. A further group indicated that ecotheological perspectives were integrated into other courses, while one third reported that ecotheology was not formally represented.

**Table 1.** Institutional presence of ecotheology

<b>Status</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Separate subject	46.7%
Integrated in other subjects	20.0%
Not a subject	33.3%

Respondents frequently interpreted this situation not as a sign of marginalisation but as an expression of ecotheology's interdisciplinary character.



## EDUCATIONAL LEVELS

**Table 2.** Educational levels in which ecotheology is taught

Level	Percentage
Bachelor	38.5%
Master	15.4%
PhD	23.1%
Other (continuing education, seminars)	23.1%

Ecotheology thus appears both as an introductory and an advanced, practice-oriented field.

## Disciplinary location and organisation

In current practice, respondents located ecotheology primarily within systematic theology, followed by biblical studies, practical theology and interdisciplinary settings. Normatively, however, there was strong support for broader integration across theological disciplines. Preferences regarding organisational form varied. While 40% favoured ecotheology as a separate subject, a comparable proportion preferred interdisciplinary programmes or integration into existing disciplines.

## Defining ecotheology: empirical themes

Across the qualitative responses, four recurrent themes emerged. Ecotheology was described as

1. relational theology concerned with the relationship between God, humans and the more-than-human world;
2. normatively oriented towards ethical responsibility and action;
3. inherently interdisciplinary in method;
4. a critical rethinking of theology as a whole rather than a thematic add-on.

Taken together, the survey results depicted a field characterised by considerable institutional and disciplinary diversity. Respondents differed



widely in how ecotheology is organised yet show a striking degree of convergence in how they defined its purpose and significance.

This suggests that ecotheology's coherence lies less in shared institutional form than in its normative orientation. While organisational models vary, there is broad agreement regarding ecotheology's relational focus, interdisciplinary character and ethical responsibility. Ecotheology thus appears to be held together not by disciplinary boundaries, but by shared concerns.

The collected data and analysed material thus invite a synthetic interpretation capable of accounting for plurality without fragmentation. This provides the immediate context for approaching ecotheology as a form of theological ecosophy.

## **Ecotheology as critique and constructive task**

The empirical findings of this study may be further illuminated by engaging the analytical framework proposed by Ernst M. Conradie, a keynote speaker at the ECerN conference in Stavanger. According to Conradie, ecotheology cannot be adequately understood merely as a thematic extension of theology, but must be approached as a field defined by a persistent tension between critique and construction.<sup>11</sup>

At the core of this framework lies what Conradie describes as a double critique. On the one hand, ecotheology involves an ecological critique of Christianity itself. This includes critical scrutiny of biblical interpretations, doctrinal emphases, ecclesial practices and forms of Christian mission that have contributed to, legitimised or failed to resist ecological destruction. On the other hand, ecotheology entails a Christian critique of ecological destruction, offering theological resources to resist anthropocentrism, consumerism and exploitative economic systems. Conradie insists that these two forms of critique must be held together.<sup>12</sup> Without the former, ecotheology risks becoming apologetic or superficial; without the latter, it risks dissolving into a general discourse on religion and ecology without a distinct theological contribution.

This dual critical task corresponds closely with the empirical material analysed in the present study. Respondents consistently described ecotheology as normatively oriented and selfcritical, rather than as a neutral academic specialisation. The emphasis on ethical responsibility,

<sup>11</sup> Conradie, "Ecotheology," 5.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*



relational ontology and interdisciplinary engagement found across the survey responses reflects an understanding of ecotheology that resonates strongly with Conradie's insistence on sustained internal critique as a condition for meaningful external engagement.

For Conradie, however, the critical task of ecotheology cannot stand alone. It is complemented by an equally important constructive task, which is likewise twofold. First, ecotheology contributes to Christian authenticity by discerning how Christian faith, doctrine and practice may be rearticulated in light of the ecological crisis. This involves what Conradie has described as an ongoing ecological reformation of Christianity, touching not only ethics but also ecclesiology, soteriology, pneumatology and eschatology. Second, on that basis, ecotheology may offer a constructive contribution to interdisciplinary and public discourse on sustainability, justice and ecological responsibility.

Importantly, Conradie cautions against overly optimistic assumptions regarding the visibility or impact of such contributions. He emphasises that ecotheology operates within a dialectic between vision and discernment where vision is the longrange theological imagination required to articulate alternative ways of inhabiting the world, grounded in Christian narratives of creation, salvation and consummation. Discernment, by contrast, concerns the ability to interpret concrete historical moments, social structures and ecological crises as sites of theological urgency or *kairos*. Ecotheology thus moves neither by abstract principle alone nor by pragmatic activism, but through sustained theological reflection attentive to both structural diagnoses and contextual particularities.

This framework provides a useful lens through which to interpret the survey data presented above. The strong conceptual convergence observed among respondents regarding the normative and interdisciplinary character of ecotheology may be understood as an expression of shared theological vision. At the same time, the considerable institutional and organisational diversity reflects processes of contextual discernment shaped by varying educational systems, ecclesial contexts and cultural conditions. From this perspective, the apparent lack of disciplinary consolidation does not indicate conceptual weakness but rather confirms Conradie's observation that ecotheology is marked by an inherently reformative and contextsensitive dynamic.

Seen in this light, the empirical material supports an understanding of ecotheology not as a stabilised subdiscipline, but as an academic field whose coherence lies precisely in its capacity to sustain critical tension: between theology and practice, between tradition and reform, and between global ecological vision and local institutional discernment.



## Ecotheology, theological ecosophy

When read in conjunction with the curriculum analysis presented in *Sacred Earth*, the survey findings suggest that ecotheology functions less as a discrete discipline and more as an integrative theological orientation. Rather than being defined primarily through institutional location or disciplinary boundaries, ecotheology appears to be held together by shared normative commitments and concerns. In this respect, the Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss's (1912-2009) concept of ecosophy offers a particularly instructive analogue for understanding ecotheology's academic character.<sup>13</sup>

Næss developed the notion of ecosophy in order to articulate a philosophically grounded and explicitly normative orientation toward the flourishing of life on Earth. While he consistently emphasised that there are many possible ecosophies, shaped by diverse cultural, philosophical and religious traditions, he also identified a set of shared commitments that characterise ecosophical thinking. As Næss formulated them, these commitments include the following principles:

1. The flourishing of human and nonhuman life on Earth has intrinsic value. The value of nonhuman life forms is independent of the usefulness these may have for narrow human purposes.
2. Richness and diversity of life forms are values in themselves.
3. Humans have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs.
4. Present human interference with the nonhuman world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening.
5. The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease in the human population.
6. Significant improvement of life conditions requires fundamental changes in economic and technological policies.
7. Life quality should be given greater priority than a high economic standard of living.
8. Those who subscribe to these points have an obligation to implement the necessary changes.<sup>14</sup>

13 Tom Sverre Bredal-Tomren, "The Articles in This Book and the Discipline of Ecotheology," i \*Contemporary Ecotheology, Climate Justice and Environmental Stewardship in World Religions\*, red. Louk Andrianos og Tom Sverre Bredal-Tomren (Steinkjer: Embla Akademisk, 2021), 21–33.

14 David Rothenberg, "Deep Ecology," in *Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics*, red. Ruth Chadwick (San Diego: Academic Press, 2012), 738–744.



Taken together, these principles articulate an ecological worldview that combines ecological insight with ethical responsibility and an explicit call to action. Ecosophy, in Næss's sense, thus refers not to a single doctrine, but to a coherent family of value-oriented worldviews united by a commitment to the intrinsic worth of the more-than-human world and the moral responsibility of human beings within it.

Understanding ecotheology as a form of theological ecosophy allows for methodological and institutional diversity while maintaining conceptual coherence. It helps explain why ecotheology resists rigid disciplinary classification without losing analytical force. As the empirical material demonstrates, ecotheology is characterised by significant variation in organisational form and disciplinary placement, yet marked by strong convergence regarding its normative orientation, relational ontology and commitment to ecological responsibility.

## Conclusion

This article has explored ecotheology as an academic field by bringing survey data into dialogue with curriculum analysis and theoretical reflection. The findings indicate a field marked by high institutional diversity alongside notable conceptual convergence. Ecotheology is therefore best understood not as a clearly bounded subdiscipline, but as an integrative theological field oriented towards ecological sustainability and social transformation. Its coherence lies less in organisational uniformity than in shared concerns regarding creation, responsibility and the moral status of the more-than-human world.

From the perspective of theological education, this integrative and normative character may be understood as a strength rather than a weakness. Ecotheology is particularly well suited to function as a formative orientation shaping curricula, research agendas and pedagogical practices across theological subdisciplines. At a time when ecological questions increasingly shape both ecclesial practice and public discourse, ecotheology's role as a critical and integrative form of theological reflection becomes very significant.

However, if ecotheology is to realise this formative potential greater attention must be paid to the processes through which ecological values, worldviews and ethical commitments are learned, cultivated and sustained. This observation extends beyond theology itself and highlights the importance of sustained engagement with research in environmental education and related pedagogical networks.



Environmental education research has, over several decades, developed sophisticated theoretical frameworks for understanding how learning, formation and transformation occur in relation to ecological challenges. Such frameworks address questions that are directly relevant to ecotheology's normative aspirations, particularly its concern with motivating individuals and institutions toward responsible ecological action.

While ecotheology has generated rich theological diagnoses of ecological crisis and compelling normative visions, it has often paid less systematic attention to questions of learning, formation and educational practice. Environmental education research, by contrast, has explored issues such as transformative learning, critical reflexivity, action competence and the relationship between knowledge, values and behaviour in considerable depth. Engagement with this body of research will strengthen ecotheology's capacity to move from theological critique and vision to sustained practices of formation within theological education, ecclesial contexts and wider society.

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