

Reconstructing Religious Identity among the Sami of Scandinavia : Christian Sami Contextual Theology in the Twenty-first Century

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Reconstructing Religious Identity among the Sami of Scandinavia: Christian Sami Contextual Theology in the Twenty-first Century

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1. Introduction

The topic of the workshop preceding the present volume was to explore both similarities and uniqueness in the ways minority groups fight, and have fought, against the dominant culture and the uniformity of globalization in order to maintain a micro-regional community. In particular, the workshop aimed at clarifying what is needed for the remaking of ethnic or regional connectedness, focusing on traditional or religious practices, trans-regional networks, leadership, and historical memories. As I have interpreted the topic, it is, in short, about exploring how specific minority groups during the last decades have been trying to resist dominant culture and the cultural uniformity potentially caused by globalization.

Instead of trying to give my own answer to the questions put for the workshop, I will here present one example of an attempt to, by way of theology, revitalize or restore parts of one indigenous tradition in order to create a new sense of belonging within a certain group. The example is the Norwegian-Sami Lutheran minister Tore Johnsen's Christian Sami contextual theology, mainly as it is presented in his book *Jordens barn, solens barn, vindens barn: kristen tro i et samisk landskap* ('The Children of the Earth, the Children of the Sun, the Children of the Wind: Christian Faith in a Sami Landscape') (2007). The global phenomenon in my example is primarily Christianity—a religion with global diffusion and claims to be a universal religion, and which was a forerunner of what we today call "globalization", namely European expansionism and worldwide colonialism. The local is here represented by Johnsen's version of indigenous Sami traditions. The local group that Johnsen appeals to—Samis in general, or at least Samis interested in the Christian religion—will not be a primary focus of this article, even though it constitutes the backdrop to his theology. In addition, Johnsen is, to some extent, both a representative of the globalizing force (Christianity) and the local community group in question (the Sami). Therefore, this example shows that neither globalization nor the locally motivated reactions against it are unambiguous processes with clear-cut parties on different sides of a boundary.

Before I present Johnsen's theology, I must say a few words about the Sami and the relations between the Sami and the Nordic Lutheran churches through history. The reason

for this is that these relations are the background to, and the main motive behind, Johnsen's theological work—one could say that it is the first context of his theology. Johnsen states in the beginning of his book that many Samis today feel that there is a conflict between being a Sami and being a Christian, and that this feeling has its roots in the “history of colonization and Norwegianization in which the Sami people lost their autonomy, and much of their cultural heritage and dignity were taken away from them” (my translation). The motivating force behind him writing the book, and creating his particular brand of theology, is his conviction that the perceived tension between being a Sami and being a Christian can be overcome (Johnsen 2007: 8–9).

2. The Sami and the Nordic Lutheran Churches: a Historical Overview

The Sami are the indigenous people of northern Norway, Sweden, Finland, and the Russian Kola Peninsula. This means that their forebears were the inhabitants of the area before it was colonized by states dominated by other ethnic groups. As a consequence of this colonization, the Sami have become a minority not only in these states, but also in Sápmi (the current name for the “Sami land”, the area inhabited by the Sami since “time immemorial”).

Sami culture was, and is, not uniform throughout Sápmi, something which is reflected in the linguistic differences. The Sami language—belonging to the Finno-Ugric language family—is divided into some ten different dialects, or varieties, which differ between the southern, northern and eastern parts of Sápmi to the extent that some of them are not mutually intelligible (and are thus, in effect, separate languages).

It is impossible to give any reliable statistics on the number of Sami and on the population's current proficiency in Sami languages, since it is not possible to include ethnicity as a variable in censuses in Scandinavian countries. Estimates of the total number of Sami today vary between 80,000 and 100,000 individuals: about 50,000–65,000 in Norway; 20,000–40,000 in Sweden; 8,000 in Finland; and 2,000 in Russia. At all events, the Sami are a small minority relative to the total Scandinavian population of slightly more than 20 million people. Around 35–50% of the Sami speak any of the Sami varieties, and all are proficient in the dominant language of the country they inhabit. An absolute majority (some 80–85%) of Sami speakers speak North Sami (Rydving 2004).

Historically, the Sami subsisted mainly from hunting, fishing and reindeer husbandry. Depending on the main form of subsistence, some groups were settled, some were semi-nomadic and some were nomadic. Despite the varying forms of subsistence historically, reindeer husbandry with nomadism has for centuries been seen as emblematic of Sami culture—and it remains so even though, today, only a small minority of the Sami are dependent on the reindeer for their income. During the twentieth century—and particularly after the Second World War—reindeer husbandry was modernized and mechanized to a large extent.

Colonization of Sápmi by the Danish-Norwegian and Swedish (including present-day Finland) kingdoms began in the sixteenth century. The colonization coincided with, among other things, the consolidation of the Nordic kingdoms and with the Reformation,

when the Nordic churches were turned into Lutheran state churches. Before that, during the Nordic Middle Ages (c. 1000–1500), Roman Catholic Christianity had prevailed among the Scandinavian-speaking populations. There is evidence of Christian missions to the Sami as far back as medieval times, and churches and monasteries were built along the coastal areas of northern Norway and the Gulf of Bothnia. Even if these churches and monasteries were meant to serve primarily the Scandinavian-speaking population, one consequence of their existence was that some contact between the Sami and the Christian religion was at hand. As a result of these contacts the Sami were influenced by, and incorporated elements from, medieval Christianity, something which can be observed in descriptions of Sami religiosity in the written sources from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as well as in archaeological findings (Kolsrud 1947; Widén 1980; Bäckman 1975: 95–110; Mebius 2003: 75–78).

In the beginning of the seventeenth century the Sami generally took part in Christian core rituals: they were baptized, married and buried according to the regulations of the Nordic churches, and they went to Communion once or twice a year. These rituals were usually enacted during winter markets when nomads gathered for trade in the vicinity of churches. Thus, to some extent, the Sami were considered Christians by the churches and the states. But still, the indigenous religion seems to have been dominant among most Sami groups before 1700; the *noaidi* was the leading religious authority, sacrifices were performed collectively, and the indigenous religion was at the time, as Håkan Rydving puts it, one of the main ethnic identity markers for being a Sami (Rydving 1993: 43, 79).

By the end of the seventeenth century the Nordic churches and states had started campaigns to combat the indigenous Sami religion. Indigenous religious conceptions and practices were no longer tolerated, and the Sami were generally considered “idolaters” and “pagans” (despite their attending church services). The intensified hostility towards the indigenous religion had several causes. First of all, the increasing colonization and exploitation of Sápmi led to increasing contacts between the Sami and church and state authorities. This in turn allowed the latter to learn more about the actual religious practices of the Sami. Simultaneously there had been a growing “confessionalization” in the European countries affected by the Reformation and the following wars of religion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This meant that correct (Christian) faith and ritual conduct became more important from the perspective of church and state authorities all over northern Europe. As a consequence, a wave of legal processes against purported practitioners of “witchcraft”, “sorcery” and “idolatry” followed. In Sweden(-Finland), a series of court trials against Sami accused of sorcery and idolatry took place in the decades around the turn of the eighteenth century. The main accusation was the breach of the first commandment in the Old Testament, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me”. In Norway, a fierce missionary campaign led by the clergyman Thomas von Westen was carried out between 1716 and 1727. This campaign was very systematic and consisted of, among other things, thorough interrogations of the Sami ritual specialists, the *noaidis*, on their world view and ritual practices. In both the missionary and legal measures taken against the indigenous Sami religion, certain traditional Sami conceptions and practices were demonized; the Sami were described as being under the influence of

Satan, their mythological beings were branded as intolerable “idols”, and their ritual and sacrificial practices were considered to be “Devil worship”. Sami sacred sites were desecrated and ritual objects (the ritual drums and sacrificial objects) were expropriated and destroyed, and the typical Sami singing tradition, the *yoik*, was branded “heathen” since it was associated with indigenous rituals (Rydving 1993: 49, 54–68, 78–83; Oja 2000: 25–28).

By the turn of the nineteenth century, Christianity was the dominant confession among the Sami. In, for example, the Lule Sami area, the indigenous religion had ceased to be an ethnic marker for being a Sami by that time (Rydving 1993: 161). Even so, fragments and reminiscences of the old religion—such as the respect and veneration of certain sacred sites, the occasional use of drums, conceptions of some of the invisible beings and some everyday rituals—continued to exist among some Sami. Some may have continued practicing the indigenous religion in secret, concealed from outsiders (something which—for obvious reasons since it was hidden and secret—has been very difficult to obtain reliable information on). But the institution of the *noaidi* as the main religious and ritual specialist, the sacrificial cult, and the main indigenous divinities had generally been abandoned. The overall context for the remaining continued practices, conceptions and the memories of the indigenous religion that was preserved in narratives was broken and largely replaced by a Christian understanding. This meant, for example, that the *noaidi* was depicted with mainly negative connotations as a “sorcerer” and “witch” among Samis themselves (and more so, it seems, in the North than in the South Sami area) (Mebius 2003: 197–213; Rydving 1993: 167; Rydving 2010: 87–88).

However much or little remained of what could be classified as remnants of pre-Christian religious ideas and practices among the Sami after the year 1800, the representatives of the church began to consider the Sami to be Christians and to regard indigenous Sami religion as something that belonged to the past. The clergy also abandoned the hostile and fierce missionary methods toward the Sami. They no longer found it necessary to directly persecute the indigenous religion since it was not considered as being conspicuous compared with the Christian devotion of the Sami.

Already in the eighteenth century Enlightenment ideas of rationalism and tolerance began to spread among Nordic clergy working among the Sami. One of the earliest examples of this is the clergyman Pehr Högström, who worked among the Lule Sami in the 1740s. Certainly he condemned what remained of the indigenous religion in his time, calling it “sorcery”, “superstition” and “idolatry”. But he also argued that the Sami had been unjustly accused of being a people particularly prone to “sorcery” and “superstition”. This applied to only a few Sami, and “sorcery” and “superstition” were also to be found among other people, he contended. Högström rather interpreted these accusations as negative ethnic stereotypes held by other ethnic groups (Scandinavians and other Europeans) (Högström [1747] 1980: 198–202). In his opinion, the Sami in their “pagan” beliefs also had a vague notion of an almighty and righteous being (i.e., of the God of Christianity) and they “knew” that the human soul is immortal. Thus, Högström argued for what is called “natural theology”, the Christian theological idea that human beings can reach a sense of the true God by way of reason and experience alone, without

knowledge of the Christian message through the Bible. To Högström, atheism—which also had sprang up as a consequence of the European Enlightenment—was a more acute problem than “superstition” and “paganism”: “godlessness is to our generation infinitely more harmful than superstition itself; even if we have been more prone to take measures against the latter than the former” (Hallencreutz 1990: 66; my translation).

When Lars Levi Læstadius—a minister of the Church of Sweden in Karesuando in the North Sami area (and founder of the revivalist movement known as Læstadianism)—wrote an overview of indigenous Sami religion in the 1840s, he noted that the Sami in his time were Christians and that the indigenous religion had perished, even if some “superstitions” originating from the past “paganism” could still be found. But he added that such “superstitions” were no more common among the Sami than among Swedes, including “Stockholm’s sophisticated riff-raff” (Læstadius [1839–1845] 2003: 52; my translation). He further argued, in line with Högström, that the Sami in their “paganism” had had a sense of the true God and of the immortality of the human soul, and that this was a natural development in human beings’ experience of nature. However, according to Læstadius, the “strength of thought” of the Sami was not enough to develop a true religion. To that end the Bible was necessary. The conclusion of this line of thought was that indigenous Sami religion was inferior to the Christian and Scandinavian religion culture, and that it was something that belonged to the past—an idea which came, to characterize the attitude of the Nordic churches toward Sami religion and indeed toward Sami traditional culture in its entirety, during the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century.

The main sources of information on the indigenous, pre-Christian, religion of the Sami are the descriptions written by the missionaries in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. One characteristic feature of the missionaries’ texts is that the different authors wrote as if their accounts were representative of Sami religion in all areas and among all different groups, that is, as if the indigenous religion was uniform throughout Sápmi; this despite the fact that the different Sami groups inhabited a vast area (about half of Fennoscandinavia), spoke different dialects or languages, and lived and subsisted in many different ways. By comparing the different authors’ descriptions—and with knowledge of which Sami groups they worked among—it is possible to ascertain variations in Sami conceptions and rituals, even if it is a quite complicated procedure since the missionaries often read and copied each other’s texts (see Rydving 2010: 57–71).

Not only did the missionaries depict Sami religion as more or less uniform wherever it was found, they also branded it as “paganism” and “idolatry”. This implies that they classified the Sami religion together with other world views and ritual systems that they considered resembled each other and that they also considered being “pagan” and “idolatrous”. All “paganism” was, according to the missionaries, basically the same. The model for “paganism” and “idolatry” they found in the Old Testament, where the worship of “other gods” (i.e., other than Jahve) was described and severely condemned (see Sundström 2012a). Since the missionaries had the ambition to depict Sami “paganism” in general, they could also freely rely on and include the accounts of other authors, describing other Sami groups without noting the provenience of individual data. That

they also understood “paganism” as a universal phenomenon—originating in the Devil—allowed them to draw parallels between Sami religion and “paganism” in other contexts they knew of (such as the Middle East in Old Testament times, ancient Rome and Greece, Old Norse mythology and European peasant culture).

3. Recycling and the Lifting of a Taboo

Since about the beginning of the 1980s a reuse of certain elements from the indigenous Sami religion has taken place in many arenas, such as in Sami visual arts, artisanry, music (*yoik*), film, poetry, dance performances, theater (see e.g. DuBois 2000; Mebius 2003: 213–220; Kraft 2009), and in the tourist industry (Mathiesen 2010). Even if these instances do not carry religious significance (at least not necessarily) for either “senders” or “receivers”, the examples show that Sami religion today has become in a sense “de-demonized” and that the former taboo has been lifted to a large extent. Writing about the restored image of the *noaidi* in today’s Sami cultural expressions, Hans Mebius (2003: 220) reminds us that it is very difficult to assess, particularly for someone viewing from outside of Sami culture, what these expressions mean and stand for in individual cases.

Also in religious contexts, elements from Sami religion have been revived, mostly in the new religious movement often referred to as “neoshamanism” (see the many examples in the recently published Kraft, Fonneland & Lewis 2015). This is, however, not a movement particularly or exclusively promoted by Samis.

Since the beginning of the 1990s certain elements from Sami traditions have also been incorporated within the Lutheran churches. In 1993—declared the International Year of the World’s Indigenous Peoples by the United Nations—the Sami Church Council within the Church of Norway¹⁾ held a seminar on “faith and identity as challenges for Sami church life”. The then-leader of the Sami Church Council, Nils Jernsletten, said during this seminar that it is essential for the church to include issues of identity and that one of the church’s tasks is to let Samis be Samis within the church. According to Tore Johnsen, this seminar became the starting point for contextual theological work within the council, and eventually a resource group for “Sami understanding of Christianity and theology” was created (Johnsen 2012).

Another important event during this year was when the Lule Sami minister of the Church of Sweden, Johan Mäarak, on the request of Bishop Gunnar Weman, sang the *yoik* of God the Father in the cathedral during a service devoted to the opening of the Church meeting of 1993. Since then *yoik* has been performed in the framework of church liturgies many times both in Sweden and Norway, and even the formerly severely demonized Sami ritual drum (labeled the “Devil’s Bible” by seventeenth-century clergy) has been used in church services. New liturgical organ music inspired by the Sami *yoik* tradition has been composed. In Norway another Sami minister (and former member of the Sami Church Council), Bierna Bientie, has been working on developing liturgies for particular Sami church rituals (e.g., conducting a Christian service at a traditional Sami sacred site or arranging the church room as a Sami *gáetie* [South Sami for the traditional dwelling] with the fireplace in the middle and letting the sanctuary of the church

correspond to the inner, formerly sacred, part of a Sami *gåetie*).

It is very difficult to ascertain how much support such attempts at including symbols from Sami religion in Church liturgies have among Sami churchgoers—no thorough study of such attitudes has been made. While some churchgoers are very positive, others seem more skeptical. One may also note that resistance against bringing pre-Christian symbols into the church has been more pronounced in the North Sami area, where the Læstadian revivalist movement is strong (Bientie 2007; Jernsletten 2009).

4. Johnsen's Contextual Theology

The hitherto most thoroughly elaborated Christian Sami contextual theology is arguably the one written and published by Tore Johnsen. Johnsen is a minister in the Lutheran Church of Norway. In 2006 he was elected leader of the Sami Church Council in the Church of Norway, and since 2009 he has been its general secretary. He was born in 1969 to a Norwegian mother and a North Sami father, and he grew up in Østfold in the southeastern part of Norway (outside of Sápmi). According to his own statement he had become more actively aware of his Sami heritage by the end of the 1980s (Johnsen 1997: 1). After becoming a minister in the Church of Norway and taking an exam in Sami languages, Johnsen served in the Norwegian Mission to the Sami people (1988–1993) and as a parish minister in Finnmark in northern Sápmi (1998–2005). For several years he has also been working on Sami issues in the diocese of Nord-Hålogaland, and has, among other things, been involved in producing a hymnal book in Sami and working out a strategic plan for Sami church life within the Church of Norway (Olsen 2011). For a three-month period in 1996 Johnsen was a visiting student at an indigenous peoples' theological center in Canada, the Dr. Jessie Saukteaux Resource Centre, run by the (Protestant) United Church of Canada. There he studied Native American "indigenous theology", which has inspired him in his own theological work. In a master thesis in theology from the Norwegian School of Theology (Norwegian: *Menighetsfakultetet*) in 1997, he presents the indigenous theology developed and taught at the center, and he suggests how this theological agenda could be transferred to a Sami Lutheran context (more precisely, the one associated with the Church of Norway) (Johnsen 1997).

In 2005 Johnsen received a scholarship from the governmental Culture and Church ministry to write a modern Sami catechism, intended to serve as "a bridge between Christian faith and Sami culture, history and identity" (Johnsen 2007: 9). The book *Jordens barn, solens barn, vindens barn* is this catechism. It was published in Norwegian in 2007, and a translation into North Sami was released in 2011.

A catechism is a manual or textbook in the Christian faith: a didactic text to instruct Christians (or would-be Christians) in the fundamentals of the religion (usually on the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed, baptism, the central prayers and the Eucharist). In the Lutheran tradition the prototype is the founding reformer Martin Luther's catechisms (the Small and the Large Catechism). Johnsen's starting point is also Luther's catechism, mainly concerning the three Creeds and the prayer Our Father (for want of space, his book does not touch upon the Ten Commandments, baptism or the Eucharist;

see Johnsen 2007: 10–11). For each chapter he briefly summarizes Luther's teachings on the issue discussed. Thus, even if Johnsen's catechism is quite creative and innovative, it also attempts to be true to the Lutheran tradition.

In the book, Johnsen suggests to consider the indigenous Sami tradition as the "crib" prepared for receiving Jesus Christ, in which Jesus Christ can be placed—in a similar way as Luther argued that the Old Testament was the crib in which Jesus Christ (and the New Testament) was placed (Johnsen 2007: 35). Johnsen was inspired to look upon the indigenous tradition as an "Old Testament", on par with the Old Testament of Israel, in his studies at the Canadian theological center a decade earlier (Johnsen 1997: 17–20, 43). The idea is, thus, to bring together the old Sami religion and spiritual tradition with the Lutheran Christian tradition, based on the thought of a natural human religion—that is, that one can find traces of the revelation of the Christian God in a certain culture, irrespective of whether that culture has come in contact with the Bible or a Christian mission.

The intended audience for Johnsen's catechism is, first and foremost, Sami readers, both adolescents and adults, but he also invites non-Sami to read the book. He hopes that it will be used in education within the church (Johnsen 2007: 3). This hope seems to have been fulfilled to some extent since the book has been given to all ministers in the northern Norwegian dioceses and has also been used as course literature in theology curriculums at the University of Tromsø (Olsen 2011: 111).

Even if one could claim that Christian theology always has been more or less "contextual" in the sense that it is inevitably embedded in a certain historical, cultural, social and political context, the contextual theology as a deliberate way of doing theology that Johnsen refers to started among Latin American theologians in the 1960s (with corresponding theological currents in Africa and Asia) in the form of Liberation theology. These Liberation theologians reacted against socio-economic and political injustices, as well as the universality claims of the European versions of Christian theology. Following the Liberation theologians, Johnsen has as his goal that his Sami contextual theology will be emancipatory; that it can support socio-economic and political change and contribute to lifting the Sami from subordination; and that it will rehabilitate Sami culture (Johnsen 2007: 141–144, 154).

Johnsen outlines three different models of contextual theology, following the Catholic theologian Stephen B. Bevans: the "Translation model", the "Anthropological model" and the "Praxis" or "Liberation model". According to Johnsen (2007: 152), the three models are all essential and they complement each other. Therefore I will here structure my presentation of Johnsen's theology after these models, although I will focus mainly on the anthropological model.

4.1 The translation model

The translation model for doing Sami contextual theology means putting the "text in context" or, more precisely, translating, for example, biblical texts and metaphors by using metaphors from traditional Sami culture. In practice, this means that one looks for correspondences to what is said in the biblical text in the cultural context and language

to which one is translating the text; this is done to make the message of the Bible understandable and relevant. The simple and didactic example Johnsen gives is when, in the Gospel of John (1:27), John the Baptist says that he is not worthy of untying the straps of Jesus' sandals. Since sandals are not a phenomenon present in traditional Sami culture, in the translation of the Bible to Sami, the word for sandal straps is translated using the word for the typical Sami shoelaces (Johnsen 2007: 6–7, 147). It might be added that these Sami shoelaces are today an ethnic marker for Saminess, and since they differ in pattern and design depending on the Sami cultural area and family, they also often signal an individual's regional and familial belonging.

4.2 The anthropological model

The anthropological model is the natural theology reading of a culture, which I have referred to above. It emphasizes cultural continuity by trying to find traces of the revelation of the Christian God in a certain cultural tradition—or correspondences to Christian beliefs and tenets in non-Christian traditions, if you will. As I have been trying to explain earlier in this chapter, this idea of a natural theology has its precursors in Nordic Lutheran theologians' reasoning about Sami traditions (e.g., in Pehr Högström's and Lars Levi Læstadius's interpretations).

It is particularly in his treatment of the Apostles' Creed that Johnsen makes use of the anthropological model. I will therefore relate how he explains his contextual theology through these creeds. The Apostles' Creed is the statement in which Christians confess and account for their faith.

4.2.1 The First Creed

The first of the three Creeds reads:

*I believe in God the Father Almighty, creator of heaven and earth.*²⁾

The “Children of the Earth” in the title of Johnsen's book refers to this creed. He associates the creed with what he claims to be common conceptions among indigenous peoples about everything in creation being inter-connected, and that human beings have a special responsibility—among all the creatures of the world—as caretakers and custodians of creation and of nature.

The examples of this idea Johnsen gives are first from the Bible and Martin Luther's interpretations of it, then from the feature film *Ofelaš/The Pathfinder*, a movie made by Sami filmmaker Nils Gaup in 1987; a film that was a huge international success. Johnsen accounts for a scene in the film, which is set in a time long ago in Sápmi, when the *noaidi*—a “shaman”, according to Johnsen—holds his hand over the mouth and nose of the main protagonist. By this, the *noaidi* wants to show that all things in the world are connected through invisible ties that we are dependent on. Like the air we breathe, we cannot see these ties, and we do not think of them—at least not before the connections are threatened, as when someone prevents you from breathing. The point with the scene is that one should never forget the interconnectedness of everything and everyone

(Johnsen 2007: 18–19; for an analysis of Gaup’s film, see DuBois 2000).

Johnsen further exemplifies his theological point with stories from elderly male Sami who explain that you must “listen to nature’s voice” (i.e., be careful and sensitive to how much you can exploit natural resources such as fish and game) and give blessings and gratitude (through rituals) to nature for the gifts nature is giving. He also draws parallels to these sayings and Native American indigenous tradition by citing the Oglala-Lakota medicine-man and Catholic catechist Black Elk. Black Elk saw similarities between Christian thought and traditional Oglala reverence for creation/nature. He explained this in terms of the “Circle of Life”, a metaphor for the idea that everything is interconnected. According to Johnsen, all indigenous peoples have emphasized the holiness of the earth and human beings’ belonging to the earth. This includes the Sami, even if they tend to forget this today in modern society. Johnsen’s point is that the Christian faith, Sami traditions, and other indigenous peoples’ spirituality are congruent on these points, and that it is imperative to listen to nature’s voice, live in gratitude towards the Creator for all the gifts we receive from the earth, and give blessing to all that lives. The chapter concludes with Martin Luther’s explanation of the first creed (Johnsen 2007: 19–29).

The themes touched upon in Johnsen’s chapter on the first creed are treated in more depth in a couple of his previous, preliminary studies—both in the master thesis on Native American indigenous theology (Johnsen 1997) and in a later ethnographic-theological study, for which he interviewed Samis in Finnmark (both male and female; reindeer herders and non-reindeer herders; middle aged and elderly) on “Sami spiritual traditions in relation to nature” (Johnsen 2005). From these studies, it is apparent that Johnsen is not unaware of the historical variations among Native American religious traditions (and cultures at large), and is not unaware of the many differences between these traditions and Sami traditions, both in history and today. (One important difference he finds between Native American and Sami traditions today is that the latter shows much more discontinuity with the past, that is, that the pre-Christian religion has disappeared to a much higher extent among the Sami.) He is also fully aware of the many varieties (linguistic, cultural, religious, etc.) within the Sami group. Still, he finds what he calls a “parallelism” among all these traditions; a parallelism that is the basis for the modern concept of “indigenous peoples”. Johnsen considers that indigenous *spiritual* traditions from different parts of the world share fundamental features, and he notices that it has become increasingly common to speak about “indigenous spirituality” as a more or less uniform phenomenon, even among indigenous peoples themselves. What the indigenous traditions have in common is (with the Native American example as his starting point) *holism*—that all that exists is connected in a mysterious, spiritual way. The connection is God, the Great Spirit or the Great Mystery. This thought is, to Johnsen, not *pantheistic*—that everything *is* God—but *panentheistic*—that God is present in everything, that everything is *in* God (Johnsen 1997: 20–21, 36–37, 40).

When Johnsen made his ethnographic study among North Sami in Finnmark, his object was to collect data on Sami “nature theology”, or the Sami “folk theology” on nature, as it appeared in ritual practice as well as in narratives and utterances. In contrast

with earlier Christian attitudes toward Sami spiritual traditions (in which Sami conceptions were demonized and described as “superstitions” and “idolatry”), Johnsen reinterprets these traditions in positive Christian terms. This means that he finds it possible to interpret them as profoundly Christian ideas, while at the same time reflecting upon them theologically from within the world view of his informants (Johnsen 2005: 68). However, Johnsen seems to consider this world view to be Christian, even though certain traits from pre-Christian times have been preserved within a Christian framework (Johnsen 2005: 18; see also Johnsen 1997: 41). The concluding motto of the study Johnsen gives by quoting one of his informants, a young female reindeer herder in Finnmark: “*Mis lea luonddukristtalašvuohta*”, “We have nature Christianity” (Johnsen 2005: 11–12).

4.2.2 Second Creed

The Second Creed in the confession is:

*I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,
he is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and he will come to judge
the living and the dead.*

This creed is about the belief in Christ, and in Johnsen’s comments he associates Christ with ancient Sami conceptions of the sun, the hearth in the fireplace and the Sami goddess Sáráhkka (Johnsen 2007: 30–48). Hence the title’s “Children of the Sun”, which, according to Johnsen, is also an epithet that the Sami at times used for themselves.

Johnsen’s line of reasoning is that in the natural environment where the biblical stories were enacted and the Bible was written, drought was the main threat to the living. Therefore the spring of water was a vigorous symbol for the source of life and for that which saves humans from death (as in Genesis 2:6 and Numbers 20:1–12). However, in the climatic and geographic conditions of Sápmi it is rather the cold and the darkness that represent this kind of threat. There the fire and the hearth in the dwelling were essential for survival, and the sun, when its light and warmth returned after a long winter, was the epitome of the source of life.

In the missionaries’ accounts from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the sun is mentioned as held by the Sami as “the mother of all that lives”. The sun was also the source of warmth and was therefore, according to Johnsen, symbolically represented in the dwellings of the nomads by the hearth. The goddess presumed to be present in the

fireplace was Sáráhká—the special protector of women and helper at childbirths. She received the life forces from a heavenly divinity through her mother, the goddess Máttaráhká, and placed these “souls” in the wombs of human women and other female creatures.

According to Johnsen, in the same way as there is an association between the sun, the hearth and Sáráhká—and they all represent the source of life—in the New Testament, there is an association between Christ and the sun. In the Bible, Christ is described as “life” and “light” (Gospel of John 1:4); and Christ’s face is compared to the sun when it shines (Revelations 1:16). In Johnsen’s interpretation, Christ, just like Sáráhká, is the helper at births because in him humans are born again in the spirit (Gospel of John 1:12–13).

Further, Johnsen draws parallels between the Christian cross and the cross-like symbol (with a rhomb connecting the arms of the cross in the middle) depicted in the center of the drumheads of many South Sami drums from the turn of the eighteenth century. This cross-like picture on the drumheads is generally interpreted as a sun symbol. Since the symbol is placed in the center of the oval drumhead, Johnsen also refers to the interpretation that there is an association between this symbol and the hearth, which is similarly placed in the center of the round traditional Sami dwelling (the South Sami *gáetie*). In the contextual theological reading of Johnsen, the connecting link is, thus, the “source of life”, symbolized by the cross and simultaneously carrying the notions of the sun, the hearth, Sáráhká and Christ.

In contrast to the pictures drawn on South Sami drumheads, some North Sami drumheads had their figures drawn on different levels above and below each other. Johnsen takes this to depict the different levels of the cosmos in the basically tripartite Sami cosmology. In Johnsen’s account the *noaidi*, or Sami “shaman”, made extracorporeal journeys to these different layers of the universe: to the sky, the underground and then back to the level of the living humans. In a similar fashion, Christ, as the Second Creed emphasizes, was sent from heaven to the world of the living, descended to the underworld and then rose again to the world of the living. Finally he ascends back to the sky. When Johnsen fuses the South Sami and the North Sami drum types, he gets a picture with a cross in the middle of a circle, with its arms stretching through all the cosmic layers. This becomes the symbol of Christ who after the resurrection and the ascension rules over the entire cosmos. To Johnsen, it is in this way possible to project the Second Creed on the combined South and North Sami drumheads.

The exact point of Johnsen’s associative mixing of the *noaidi*’s and Christ’s cosmic journeys, and of the pictures on the South and North Sami drumheads, is a bit difficult to catch. He makes sure to mention that Christ is no “shaman”. But he was, according to the Bible (Tim. 2:5), just like the *noaidi*: a “mediator between God and humankind”. And just like the *noaidi*, Christ is a “healer” of human beings, according to Johnsen. But Christ is in addition the healer of the whole of creation. In Johnsen’s theology, the circle of the drum becomes the “holy circle”. Humans can sit down in this circle around its center, which is the life-giving hearth, the sun and Christ.

4.2.3 The Third Creed

Since Johnsen's general points have been sufficiently exemplified by now, I will here only mention his comments on the Third Creed briefly. In the Apostles' Creed the third part reads:

*I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting.*

This topic concerns the "Children of the Wind" in the book's title. Johnsen (2007: 50–65) draws parallels between the words for "spirit", meaning both "breath" and "wind" in the original biblical texts (*ruah* in Hebrew and *pneuma* in Greek) and the North Sami words *vuoigga* ("spirit") and *vuoigat* ("to breathe") as well as the word *vuoigastit* ("to rest"). To "rest" is also a spiritual concept in the Bible. The Hebrew word for "rest" is *shabbat* (Sabbath)—according to Johnsen, a word closely connected with the harmony and wholeness you find in the presence of God. Thus, he, again, finds associations between Christian and indigenous Sami concepts and conceptions.

4.3 The praxis or liberation model

According to Johnsen (2007: 149–150), the liberation model for contextual theology makes it emancipatory, that is, it can support socio-economic and political change. To my mind this is less a model for a type of contextual theology than the other two are. Rather—or at least more so than it is a model—it is the expected and hoped-for outcome of doing contextual theology. Johnsen's point is that contextual theology in a Christian Sami setting can be a tool for liberation and emancipation from the social and political subordination that the Sami have long been subjected to. He has delved upon this aspect more thoroughly and deeply in other texts (e.g., Johnsen 2013), where he has been more concerned with the practical issue of the reconciliation process between the Church of Norway and the Sami.

5. Concluding Remarks

This has been merely a brief summary of some of the issues Tore Johnsen treats in his catechism (and other texts). Admitting that there are many more interesting details that deserve to be presented, I will leave the other parts of his book for now.

Johnsen's contextual theology is very creative, innovative and at times almost playful. It is worth mentioning that his attempt at creating a new Christian theology for the Sami is tentative. In his analysis of Johnsen's theology, Torjer Olsen (2011: 115) remarks that choosing the genre "catechism" suggests that the book attempts at being "hegemonic and representative". However, this does not seem to be Johnsen's intention,

at least not explicitly. The concluding words of *Jordens barn, solens barn, vindens barn* are “This book is [...] not a closed project, but rather an open invitation to a continued conversation on the gospel and culture in Sápmi” (Johnsen 2007: 155; my translation).

Johnsen is well aware of what he is doing—that he mixes selected Sami conceptions from different epochs and areas and puts them together with Christian ideas and concepts, as well as with conceptions from other indigenous traditions. That he is a theologian and not a historian of religions is something that he makes sure to mention (e.g., Johnsen 2005: 72, note 55). This means that he is also fully aware of the fact that he does not treat his material in a way a historian of religions would (or should). I am not a theologian, a Christian or a Sami, so I am not in the position to tell whether his attempt at a Sami contextual theology is a good or bad attempt, or whether it is good or bad theology at all. His deliberate, transparent and self-reflective construction of a Christian Sami contextual theology, and his suggestions to revitalize (and modify) certain conceptions from a historical past also makes it somewhat pointless for me, as a historian of religions, to try to deconstruct it. The way the theology has been constructed is already manifest and obvious in Johnsen’s own work.

My aim in this paper has instead been to present Johnsen’s theological project as an example of an attempt to remake ethnic connectedness and to resist dominant culture and the cultural uniformity potentially caused by globalization. This is what Johnsen is attempting by suggesting a new theological understanding of indigenous Sami religion (both past and present), a religion that was earlier condemned by the church. However, it is interesting to note that Johnsen is at the same time a representative and advocate of one prominent globalizing force: Christianity. He is, after all, a Christian missionary. And he does not really suggest a new understanding of the Christian Lutheran doctrine. In his own catechism, he has no wish to replace or break with Luther’s catechism, that is why he in every chapter quotes Luther’s teachings on the subject discussed (Johnsen 2007: 11).

In his construction of a Sami contextual theology, Johnsen is greatly inspired by Christian “indigenous theology” among Native Americans. The sense of affinity among indigenous peoples can be seen as a consequence of globalization, even if the very idea of “indigenusness” has an emphasis on local culture. Despite earlier differences, the indigenous peoples have had common experiences of being colonized by and subjugated to other cultures, religions, and regimes. In today’s globalized world, former ethnic and religious boundaries and diversities between these peoples are not as relevant to their strivings as are the common experiences and the similarities that can be found among them (see Sundström 2012b). By joining forces they can appeal to international support in their fight against local injustices. Examples of similarities in their religious outlooks can be found in the historical documentation of their traditional cultures, mainly made by colonial powers, who interpreted their religions as basically the same—as “paganism”, “primitive religion” or “nature religion”.

It is fully understandable that a theologian wishes to make her or his theology socially and politically relevant in the present while, at the same time, trying to ground new interpretations in a supposed past or origin. In Johnsen’s case he reinterprets

indigenous Sami religion as “natural theology”—a response to the true God of Christianity—instead of as “paganism”, that is, as a response to the Devil.

Even if Johnsen does not try to promote an essentially new understanding of Christian doctrine in all its aspects, he, as a Sami, makes an attempt at rehabilitating Saminess, Sami culture and (above all) the formerly demonized indigenous Sami religion within the Church of Norway. One could say that he attempts to reverse the image of the indigenous religion as inferior and as something belonging to the past. In doing this, he proposes the revitalization of certain Sami ideas and symbols. The objective of his project is to make the Sami feel at home in his church and with the Christian message. His hopes are also that his contextual Sami understanding of the Christian message can appeal to Samis however and wherever they live—as reindeer herders in the north or as office workers in Nordic big cities. Whether his hopes will be fulfilled or not is probably too early to tell.

Notes

- 1) The Sami Church Council in the Church of Norway was created in 1992. The assignment of the Council is to promote, protect and coordinate Sami church life in the Church of Norway, as well as to see to it that indigenous peoples' issues are considered in the church. The council has seven members, among which the North Sami, Lule Sami and South Sami respectively should be represented. Two of the members are nominated by the Norwegian Sami Parliament (see <http://www.gammel.kirken.no/?event=dolink&famID=244>, accessed April 1, 2015).
- 2) The English version of the Apostles' Creed presented here is the one used by the Church of Norway in its translation of *The Service Book for the Church of Norway*, 2011 (see https://kirken.no/globalassets/kirken.no/om-troen/liturgier-oversatt/baptism_within_principal_service.pdf, accessed February 1, 2016). I would like to express my gratitude to Caryn Jones, who proof read this manuscript, for guiding me to this source.

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