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An ecocritical analysis of two Sámi ecotheologians

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# Sámi ecotheology as a resource for the church of Norway

## *An ecocritical analysis of two Sámi ecotheologians*

Tom Sverre Bredal-Tomren

In several church declarations dating as far back as the 1990s, it is stated that Sámi spirituality provides an important impulse for churches that want to develop ecotheology. In this article, I examine how two well-known Sámi priests, Bierna Leine Bientie and Tore Johnsen, have received this encouragement and what characterizes their ecotheological responses. By studying selected publications from these two, using established methods for the analysis of ecotheological texts, I show that they present an ecotheology that places more emphasis on building ecocentric worldviews than on promoting concrete solutions. This stands in contrast to the dominant theology in the Church of Norway, which places great emphasis on ethics in its statements. I conclude that Sámi theologians, measured against the findings in this analysis, challenge the church of Norway and other western churches to focus more on the connection between humans and other species and on the value of non-human nature in future ecotheological statements.

In the last fifty years, both theologians and church forums have become increasingly concerned with how religion can motivate people to engage in the struggle for ecological sustainability. Consequently, a new discipline has emerged within theology which is referred to as ecotheology.

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Under this heading, conferences are held, professional networks and journals have sprung up, and courses have been created at colleges and universities.

I have earlier defined ecotheology as “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>1</sup>

One of the approaches that has emerged within this new discipline is inspired by Indigenous spirituality. The emphasis on Indigenous spirituality in ecotheology can be traced back to the World Council of Churches (WCC). While working on the Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation Programme (JPICP) in Seoul in 1990, the General Assembly of the WCC stated that member churches committed themselves to “deepening our biblical understanding, rediscovering old traditions (e.g. the patristic teaching on creation) and developing new theological perspectives concerning creation and the place of humanity within it, through opening ourselves to learn from the insights of indigenous peoples.”<sup>2</sup> The idea that Indigenous peoples’ worldviews and spiritualities offer impulses that are useful to Christian theologians in their efforts to develop ecotheology has since then been consolidated and expressed in official statements by various churches. One such statement made by the Church of Norway (CoN) provides the context for this article. Since 1996 the synod of the CoN has emphasized that Indigenous peoples’ perceptions of reality, in particular the Sámi perspective, offer resources that are important for the church’s work on nature, the environment, climate, and consumption.<sup>3</sup>

Twenty-six years have passed since the CoN first made this statement in 1996. During this time, the Synod and the Bishop’s Council of the CoN have made more than ten declarations on the environment and climate. In parallel, the Sámi Church Council of the CoN and some Sámi theologians have engaged in revealing and conveying the Sámi perception of reality, spirituality, nature, and ethics and how it is useful for the renewal of ecotheology in the CoN and other churches.

In this article, I examine what characterizes Sámi ecotheology, based on the work of two Sámi priests. In previous publications, I have analysed the ecotheology of the CoN in the period 1969–2019.<sup>4</sup> This article is a continuation of that work, but with the spotlight on Sámi ecotheology.

The search for Sámi ecotheology reflects a global trend where minority groups, and not least indigenous theologians, read the Bible and develop

theology based on their own experiences and culture. Many of the actors are inspired by South American liberation theology. Within indigenous theology, various networks, professional conferences, and professional programmes have been developed. Indigenous theology arose during the 1990s as an international academic debate closely linked to the struggles of indigenous peoples.<sup>5</sup> Indigenous scholars from North America, Aotearoa/New Zealand and Australia stood at the forefront, and it has spread to indigenous scholars in other parts of the world, including Sápmi.<sup>6</sup>

Two of the Sámi priests at the forefront of Sámi ecotheology are Bierna Leine Bientie and Tore Johnsen, whose ecotheological reflections are explored in this paper.<sup>7</sup> It must be emphasized that Bientie and Johnsen are far from the only two contemporary Sámi theologians who have been writing about the Sámi understanding of the relationship between humans and nature. Jorunn Jernsletten, Lovisa Mienna Sjöberg, and others have published texts concerning Sámi cosmology.<sup>8</sup> Other examples of theologians who have written texts about the ecotheological potential of Sámi religion: As early as 1994, Roald Kristiansen wrote the article *Sami religion in an ecological context*, in 1997 Sigurd Bergman wrote an article on environmental protection and Sámi art and theology, and in 2012 Mika Vähäkangas wrote a chapter on the environmental potential in the preaching of the Sámi priest Lars Levi Læstadius.<sup>9</sup>

In this article, however, the focus is on the works of Bientie and Johnsen, partly due to their relevance and partly to their influence: both wrote explicitly about ecotheology as far back as the period 2000–2005, which made them well-known pioneers in ecotheology.<sup>10</sup> Second, they are both ordained priests, and this fact and their positions imply that they both have been considered official religious leaders by at least parts of the Sámi community in Norway. The questions explored in this article are:

1. What characterizes the ecotheology of the Sámi priests Bierna Bientie and Tore Johnsen?
2. What unique ideas do those Sámi theologians offer to the CoN and to international ecotheology in general?

## Methods and tradition

This analysis is based on methods developed within the ecocritical tradition. Ecocriticism is a normative hermeneutic discipline that seeks to

examine texts in terms of how they describe the relationship between human beings and nature.<sup>11</sup> The parallel to this discipline in theology is referred to as *ecological hermeneutics*.<sup>12</sup> In other words, the analysis here can be referred to as an ecocritical analysis of selected works by Bientie and Johnsen.

To this end, various analytical tools were tested. Of importance here are methods taken from a Norwegian book published by me in 2019 and one of my articles from 2021. From the book, *Church, Environment and Sustainability: A Study of Environmental Statements from Major Churches in the Period 1969–2019 and a Detailed Analysis of How the Church of Norway has Worked with the Green Shift over 50 Years* (translated from the Norwegian), I use an analysis sheet examining theological motifs, ethics, epistemology, and themes and problems against the parameters of *anthropocentric*, *biocentric*, and *theocentric*.<sup>13</sup> From the article, published in 2021, *How Green was Martin? An Ecocritical Analysis of Selected Lutheran texts in Search of an Ecotheology Syllabus for a Theological Environmental Education*,<sup>14</sup> I borrow the analytical sheet below focusing on ethical argumentation.<sup>15</sup>

The arguments given for why one ought to engage in environmentalism reveal information about an author’s value system. The sheet is reproduced below:

| <i>Ethical Justification</i> |   |
|------------------------------|---|
| Anthropocentric              | <i>Strong: Living Humans</i><br><i>Weak: Future Humans</i>                      |
| Biocentric                   | All living things<br>Higher organisms<br>Endangered species                     |
| Ecocentric                   | Areas<br>Ecosystems<br>Earth  |
| Theocentric                  | <i>theo-Ecocentric</i><br><i>theo-Biocentric</i><br><i>theo-Anthropocentric</i> |

This sheet, which is inspired by Michael Nortchott’s work, shows different ways of giving an ethical justification for environmental commitment.<sup>16</sup> The ethical rationale provides information about what the authors value – and thus insight into how they think about the relationship between nature, humanity and God.

In addition to these tools, use is made of established categories from the works of Bo Brander and H. Paul Santmire. From Brander, I borrow the concept of transitive versus intransitive theological motifs.<sup>17</sup> A transitive motif is a theological motif that implies ethical activity, while an intransitive motif refers to a theological motif focusing on ontology and not ethics.

From Santmire's work, the following categories are used: reconstructionists, apologists, and revisionists.<sup>18</sup> Reconstructionists are theologians who reject Christian faith and theology as sources for ecotheology and believe that a new theology must be created independently of traditional Christianity. Apologists, on the other hand, defend traditional Christian theology as a good source for environmental ethics, while revisionists refer to those who want to renew Christian theology without rejecting the basis of faith and the Bible. Before returning to these categories, this article presents the ecotheology of Bientie and Johnsen, beginning with Bientie's article "It's The Land That Owns the People: A Southern Sámi Perspective".

### Bierna Bientie's ecotheology

Bierna Bientie (born 1951) was raised by Sámi parents in a South Sámi context at Meråker, in the Trøndelag region of Norway. He studied theology at Menighetsfakultetet (MF) in Oslo and was ordained in 1978. From 1998 to 2014, he served as priest for the Årjel-saemieh (Southern Sámi). Bientie has published one ecotheology article, "It's The Land That Owns the People", which is the basis for the present study. This article was written for the anthology *Green Readings: Ecotheology and Everyday Church Life* (Grønn postil: Økoteologi og kirkehverdag) 2001, which was published in collaboration with the Church of Norway National Council. The article can be read as a response to the CoN Synod's desire to discover how Sámi spirituality and ethics can be a resource for ecotheology in the CoN. Bientie's article has since been edited and published on the Sámi Church Council's website. The discussion in this article will be based on the original article ("Det er landet som eier folket").

Bientie's article is seven pages long, does not include a bibliography, and has few footnotes. The text gives the impression more of a professional article than a scientific publication, which is consistent with the fact that it was not peer-reviewed or registered as a scientific article.<sup>19</sup>

When Bientie gives an account of Sámi conceptions of nature, he refers to Sámi tales as well as to quotes from consultations (The Karasjok Declaration), prominent Sámi writers (John Turi and Nils-Aslak

Valkeapää), fellow priest Tore Johnsen, and the former head of the Sámi Church Council, Ole Mattis Hetta. In addition, Bientie refers to cultural practices he is familiar with from his childhood. The sources Bientie has turned to include past and present texts and quotes from within the Sámi Nation. In other words, he builds on anthropocentric sources. In terms of content, he consistently argues for the importance of listening to the needs of animals, the voice of the landscape, and the voice of the people. He acts as an advocate for biocentric- and ecocentric-oriented epistemology.

According to Bientie, the Sámi conception of nature is expressed in Sámi myths, stories, and religious performances, a claim he illustrates by citing the Sámi creation story *The Golden Age and How it Ended*, as retold in Kirsti Birkeland's *Staloer Think That The Moon is Blue* (1986).<sup>20</sup> The story ends with two brothers, Adtjis and Naevie, dividing the land between them. Bientie interprets the narrative. He believes that, as in many other Sámi stories, the main emphasis is on *Jupmele* (God) having created everything. The idea that everything that lives comes from God is what Bientie calls "a basic premise" of Sámi nature thinking, and one that stands alongside three other "realities" in the Sámi conception of nature:

1. Everything in creation has its place, and everything has a claim to and right to life.
2. There is a kinship between people and animals and the landscape.
3. Everything that is created is in a close relationship with the divine powers.<sup>21</sup>

The rest of Bientie's (2001) article elaborates on how these three "realities" are expressed in the Sámi storytelling tradition and practice. The first reality, that everything has a right to life, surfaces in the Sámi notion that everything created has its progenitor (*mádu*) who protects the species. The idea that *mádu* can attack those who destroy and torment an animal (whether a frog or a mouse) is inculcated in Sámi children. Bientie interprets this storytelling tradition as an expression of how Sámi children are taught to treat all animals with respect.<sup>22</sup> The second, that there is kinship between everything that lives, is visible in, among other things, the Sámi fairy tale figure of the *Stallo* (Trolls). The Sámi live in a community that includes supernatural beings, land, magic, and people, and this holistic community expresses itself in

Sámi everyday life. Bientie then quotes Johan Turis, who is considered to be the first Sámi to write in his native language:

The reindeer herding Sámi call the land “reindeer grazing land”, and they say that these are beautiful and good reindeer grazing areas. They express it as follows: These areas are such beautiful and good reindeer grazing areas that they laugh. And when you are happy and everything is going well, you think that all the reindeer pastures are happy, and when you are sad, then you think that the land, all the stones, all the trees and the whole world is crying. (Author’s own translation)<sup>23</sup>

Bientie emphasizes that the landscape is a subject that one must become friends with. Here, he agrees with the American ecologist, Aldo Leopold, who developed an ecocentric environmental ethic based on the idea that areas and ecosystems must be considered subjects with their own rights.<sup>24</sup>

Bientie then turns to Tore Johnsen (to whom we will return later in the text), who argues that Sámi ideas about the relationships between different species and cosmic forces are more synthetic than in Western thinking. Western thinking tends to start with limited and defined parts and then move to the whole. In contrast, the Sámi thinking expressed in myths, stories, and practice tends to focus on the whole before moving on to the parts, according to Bientie. Bientie also emphasizes that the land owns the people, meaning that there is a commonality between nature, the area of land, and humans and that the individual is subordinate to the consideration of the whole.

To show how the idea of community is expressed in Sámi practice, Bientie then describes the Siida structure, which consists of families working together to herd reindeer. He explains that it is a tradition among the herders to ask the pastures and landscape for permission to stay. The article then describes how the Sámi are raised to handle other animals. Sámi tradition includes rituals for asking the bear for forgiveness for killing it, rituals linked to the killing of reindeer, and taboos against eating all parts of the reindeer. Bientie concludes with a section on how the Sámi conception of nature has undergone change throughout history, with the biggest change being linked to the arrival of Christianity in the Sámi regions. Bientie, however, believes that at the date of writing (2001), Sámi culture was in a new period of transformation due to secularization. Bientie ends with a quote from the then chairman of the Sámi Church Council, Ole Mattis Hetta: “Nature, which is something



God-given, something we should exploit only according to what we need, seems to be lost. This is the scourge of modernism, not a consequence of the Christianisation, but of the secularisation of the Sámi.”<sup>25</sup>

Bientie’s article underlines that Sámi cosmology contains ecological knowledge concerning how everything is connected. His ecotheology underpins an ecological identity in the reader, rather than advocating for concrete environmental behaviours. Bo Brander refers to ecotheological motifs that emphasize changing perceptions as intransitive and to motifs that are aimed at creating environmentally ethical practices as transitive.<sup>26</sup> In other words, Bientie’s project is to demonstrate how a Sámi understanding of reality can be a source of inspiration for a more ecological interpretation of existence. His ecotheology is, in this sense, more oriented towards ontology than ethics. His message is that Sámi traditional worldviews and Sámi virtues can inspire the development of a more ecological and holistic understanding and approach than what exists in the traditional teaching of the Western churches. Since we here limit ourselves to analysing a single article, it must be mentioned that, although Bientie has not written many academic articles, he has expressed the same message in several situations. An example of this is a lecture he gave at Sámi Church Days in Mo in 2013 entitled *Holy Word about Holy Ground: Nature in our Christian Traditions*.<sup>27</sup>

Although Bientie does not write explicitly about how to behave in times of environmental crisis, his message emphasizes the intrinsic value of nature and ecosystems. This intrinsic value is rooted most deeply in the fact that God (*Jupmele*) has created everything. He argues implicitly for what I have called theo-ecocentric environmental ethics.<sup>28</sup> This means that everything that lives, including landscapes, has intrinsic value and that this intrinsic value comes about through the fact that God has created everything as a community. A theologian who argues in a similar fashion is James Gustafson.<sup>29</sup>

Bientie concludes the article with a warning against secularization. If the Sámi population stops believing in God, they will lose the notion of nature as something sacred. The secularization and desacralisation of nature are linked. For Bientie, this presents a major threat to the traditional Sámi conceptions of the connection between nature and humans.<sup>30</sup> Bientie’s project is not to critique the Christian tradition as a source of ecotheological commitment, but to provide impulses from Sámi tradition that can contribute to a more holistic theology. He can be classified as what H. P. Santmire refers to as a “revisionist ecotheologian”.<sup>31</sup>

## Tore Johnsen's ecotheology

The theologian Tore Johnsen (born 1969), educated at MF (1998), is a former parish priest at Tana and Nesseby and a former general secretary of the Sámi Church Council. He was raised in the Østfold region of Norway by a Sámi father and a Norwegian mother. Johnsen has written on both ecotheology and other Sámi-related subjects and has approximately fifteen publications to his name. In 2021, he defended his doctoral thesis with the title *The Contribution of North Sámi Everyday Christianity to a Cosmologically-Oriented Christian Theology*. Because Johnsen has published a large number of texts, it is necessary to limit this analysis to those that best express his ecotheology. As a starting point, I examined what is perhaps his most pronouncedly ecotheological article, "Teologi fra Livets Sirkel: Økoteologiske refleksjoner med utgangspunkt i samisk joikepoesi og indiansk filosofi" (trans. "Theology from the Circle of Life: Ecotheological Reflections based on Sámi Joik Poetry and Native American Philosophy"), published in 2007.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, I use material from *Sámi luondduteologiij – Samisk naturteologi: på grunnlag av nålevende tradisjonsstoff og nedtegnede myter* (trans. *Sámi Luondduteologiij – Sámi Natural Theology: On the Basis of Surviving Traditional Material and Recorded Myths*) from 2005 and *Barn av jorden, barn av solen, barn av vinden: Kristen tro i et samisk landskap* (trans. *Children of the Earth, Children of the Sun, Children of the Wind: Christian Faith in a Sámi Landscape*), also published in 2007.

In "Theology from the Circle of Life: Ecotheological Reflections Based on Sámi Joik Poetry and Native American Philosophy" (2007), Johnsen discusses the potential of Indigenous spirituality for the development of a new ecotheology.<sup>33</sup> He begins by stating that Western Christian theology has accentuated the value of humans to such a degree that the rest of nature has been devalued. This has created an anthropocentric worldview wherein humans are something apart from and elevated above the rest of nature.<sup>34</sup> By extension, nature has been reduced to a means of achieving human objectives. Johnsen presents much the same argument in his ecocriticism as Lynn White Jr. did in his legendary essay *The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis* (1967). For White Jr., the solution was to revitalize Christian theology with the help of St Francis of Assisi's theology.<sup>35</sup> For Tore Johnsen, the solution lies in Indigenous spirituality: "Indigenous spiritual traditions represent a fundamentally ecological vision of life. My claim is that by virtue of this, they can help the church to dig deeper into the ecological dimensions of its own faith."<sup>36</sup>

For Johnsen, the solution to the environmental problem is, in part, as it was for White Jr., to adjust Western Christians' worldview and belief systems with the help of ecological impulses – what Johnsen calls “visions”.<sup>37</sup> His point of departure is that Indigenous people's traditional worldviews and religious systems contain impulses that can encourage theologians and churches to develop a more ecological worldview.

Johnsen then refers to the *joik* “Suola ja noaidi” (“The Thief and the Shaman”), which was written down in 1820. *Joik* is traditional Sámi folk music. According to Johnsen, this *joik* is authentic testimony to how the Sámi experienced colonization and to the connection they saw between Western theology, oppression, and the exploitation of nature. He refers to the *joik* as a Sámi variant of White Jr.'s essay.<sup>38</sup>

In this *joik*, there is a dialogue between “the thief”, who, in Johnsen's interpretation, is a Norwegian, and “the shaman”, whom Johnsen identifies as a Sámi. The dialogue is said to be a conversation between a Norwegian colonialist who exploits nature and a Sámi who has a more ecological worldview. Johnsen writes that the story probably refers to Genesis, where God walks in the Garden of Eden and talks to Adam and Eve. I would add that the *joik*, in both form and content, could just as well be read as a text with associations to the dialogues in the Book of Job. In form, the *joik* has the same dialogic structure as the conversation in the Book of Job between the “sons of God”, the “co-accuser”, Job, and his friends.<sup>39</sup>

Regardless of whether Johnsen interprets the biblical reference in the *joik* thoroughly or not, his message is clear: “Suola ja noaidi” has an Indigenous perspective that provides a corrective to the traditional Western Christian conception of nature.

When Johnsen argues that the Church can, and should, change its theological perspective, he refers to Latin American liberation theology. According to Johnsen, the liberation theology movement shows that it is possible for churches to change their theological perspective intentionally. In other words, he is presupposing that Christian theology can and must be modified through the conscious use of philosophy and metaphors. Johnsen does not want to reject the Christian faith and spirituality, but he does want to renew them with the help of Sámi impulses. In a sense, he, like Bientie, appears to be a revisionist ecotheologian.<sup>40</sup>

When it comes to concrete impulses for change, Johnsen refers to the Native American idea of the Circle of Life and the Wheel Philosophy. According to this tradition, “The Creator, The Great Spirit, is present in all things and thus present in the whole circle.”<sup>41</sup> The Creator is the source of life from which all living things spring. Johnsen points out

that this does not imply pantheism (everything is god), but panentheism (everything is in god). This is a well-known distinction that, among others, Jürgen Moltmann uses to emphasize the necessity for an ecological theology that emphasizes both God's immanence and transcendence.<sup>42</sup>

Johnsen then goes on to present an ecological reading of the original sin and the fall of Adam and Eve in the book of Genesis and in the events of Christ and the Kingdom of God in the New Testament. In this section, he refers to Bible verses focusing on the relationship between God and nature, specifically Gen. 2:7 (man created from earth), Ps. 104:1, Gen. 1:31 (and God saw it was good), John 1:1–14 (Logos prologue), Col. 1:15–20 (about the cosmic Christ), Rom. 5:12–19 (first and second Adam), Rom. 8:19–22 (creation and the consequence and expectation of the Fall), Eph. 1:10 (cosmic reconciliation), and Rev. 21:1 (The New Heaven and New Earth).<sup>43</sup> Johnsen then moves on to bridge the history of salvation and the concept of the circle of life. Apart from the reference to the *joik*, Johnsen does not refer directly to Sámi sources in this article.

However, in the book *Children of the Earth, Children of the Sun, Children of the Wind* (2007), Johnsen draws extensively on Sámi texts and traditional material. The aim of this book is to strengthen Sámi church life and give the reader an experience of Sámi tradition and history.<sup>44</sup> This book is designed as a catechism, with the creed and The Lord's Prayer. Johnsen highlights many of the same Bible verses as in the article mentioned above. In contrast to the article, however, he also incorporates references to and examples from Sámi culture. He uses cosmology from the *noaide* drums (shaman drums), descriptions of the Earth as a circle with a fire in the centre, and cosmology linked to life in the *goahti* (traditional Cabin) and the *lavvu* (traditional tent).<sup>45</sup> He also draws on tales and legends, pre-Christian notions of above-world and underworld beings, elements from Sámi church history, and preaching and quotations that derive from different Sámi individuals.<sup>46</sup> He refers to Johan Turi, to Lars Læstadius' sermons, to Knut Leem's description of Anders Paulson's drum, and, most of all, to a number of conversations he has himself had with Sámi representatives.

The sources for this book thus include Bible verses, traditional Christian dogma, and Sámi ontology, cosmology, and culture. In the last chapter, Johnsen includes an academic discussion of the relationship between theology and cultural context or, in other words, contextual theology.<sup>47</sup> Johnsen does not reject Christian theology as a valid resource for inspiration in questions related to climate and the environment in

this book either; however, he wants to renew the theology. The book confirms Johnsen's adoption of a revisionist approach.

Johnsen himself links his methodology to the tradition of contextual theology. His starting point is that the incarnation – God becoming human – means that God enters concrete historical realities. Since God enters the world with his presence, he must also be sought in concrete cultures: "He fills the world with his presence and seeks us exactly in that place, in that culture and in the reality we live in."<sup>48</sup> This implies that contextual theology not only interprets and investigates the Scriptures, but also cultures. With this introduction, the reader is invited to absorb insights from anthropology, sociology, and other humanistic scientific disciplines. This means, as we have seen, that the Sámi interpretations of life, faith, and nature become relevant sources when Johnsen develops ecotheology.

A third publication by Johnsen that confirms his emphasis on culture is *Sámi Luondduteologiija – Sámi Natural Theology*. This publication was an ethnographic thesis Johnsen wrote to fulfil a requirement for a continuing professional development course with the Norwegian Association of Clergy. In this text Johnsen builds partly on traditional material to which he gained access through conversations and interviews with 18 Sámi in inner Finnmark and partly on writings by Anders Fjellner.<sup>49</sup> Johnsen draws attention to certain practices which, in his view, unveil the Sámi understanding of nature: *russestit áksána*, a rite where one carves the sign of the cross into a reindeer's skull in connection with its slaughter; *sivdnidit* (the blessing), when one goes out with the remains of the bones; *an diida*, a tradition whereby marrow bones are split completely to avoid accidents; *guoržu*, unwritten rules for treating a dog with dignity, including rules for how the dog is to be killed; *sivdnideapmi*, a blessing in connection with the cutting down of trees; *jearrat lobi* and *sivdnideapmi*, rites related to accommodations and residence; *vitkat*, or asking for peace/grounding when there is unrest in a place; the tradition of giving some food or drink to the animals/the underground; expressions of wishes and thanks to the grazing land; *sivdnideapmi*, in connection with travels; *joik*, as communication with nature; the tradition of *sieidi*, cultivation of the earth as a power centre in nature; *runebomma* (the shamans drum), which some ancients used; *luonddujiena guldalit*, listening to the voice of nature: an attitude of travelling in nature; and *diida*, signs and omens as guiding impulses in life.

Several of these practices were discussed by writers before Johnsen. As early as 1999, Karen Marie Eira Buljo was writing about the tradition of blessings (*sivdnidit*) in connection with journeys and at other life

events.<sup>50</sup> The phenomenon of a good attitude and unqualified fortune, which we address below, is largely based on Nils Oskal's research into the phenomenon.<sup>51</sup> In short, many of Johnsen's findings were described by other Sámi researchers and writers before him, but he investigates the phenomena further and links them to theological tradition.

After discussing the various phenomena, Johnsen concludes that they partly originate from Christian traditions and partially from Sámi pre-Christian ideas and cosmology. Johnsen's informants did not perceive this as contradictory, and they balanced the two perspectives in a way that allowed them to exist side by side, thus incorporating old Sámi cosmology and practices into a Christian cosmology.<sup>52</sup> This way of relating and mixing different forms of religiosity and cosmology corresponds to what Roald Kristiansen found among the northern Norwegian coastal population.<sup>53</sup>

Based on his analyses of the interviews he undertook, Johnsen finds that the Sámi understanding of nature and the Sámi worldview are characterized by a perception wherein the divine is present in nature through the underground, spirit beings, and the direct presence of God and that the spiritual dimension influences the order of nature. As humans must conform to this dimension's dealings with nature, they must learn to listen to the voice of nature (*luonddujiena guldalit*). For Johnsen, a cautious and listening attitude towards nature indicates respect for nature.<sup>54</sup> A Sámi way of expressing that one lives in harmony with nature and the surroundings is that one has *reinlykke* (reindeer fortune).<sup>55</sup> *Reinlykke* is something you are partly born with, but which you can nevertheless influence positively or negatively by living in accordance with the laws of nature. Johnsen expresses it as follows:

The customs of asking for permission to reside on the land, formulating wishes and giving thanks to the grazing areas, appeasing and honouring the grazing land through the *joik*, not violating the *sieidis*, etc. are about getting along with the grazing land, and all these factors have an impact on your reindeer fortune.<sup>56</sup>

When Johnsen refers to the notion and meaning of "reindeer fortune" in the Sámi perception of reality, he refers, as previously mentioned, to Nils Oskal's PhD thesis.<sup>57</sup>

After presenting the various aspects of Sámi cosmology that were identified in his interviews, Johnsen correlates his findings with elements from the Bible and Christian doctrine. He ends the text with a discussion of the

relationship between Sámi pre-Christian ideas and his own Lutheran Christianity and of what characterizes Sámi spirituality.

The sources used are Sámi cultural practice, research into Sámi practices and knowledge of nature, and interviews, as well *Sámi luondduteologiija* as recorded narratives on the one hand, and Bible verses and systematic theology on the other. Johnsen maintains that the Christian faith, according to its traditional design, is anthropocentric and thus can be adjusted by way of impulses from Sámi cosmology and spirituality. In this third publication, he also appears to be an ecotheological revisionist. His focus is more on ontology than ethics – and, implicitly, he appears as a spokesperson for ecocentrally-based environmental ethics.

Before leaving Johnsen, it should be noted that his PhD thesis was published as a paperback in May 2022 in which he presents new data based on new interviews.<sup>58</sup> The findings and analyses in his thesis correspond to a large extent with his previous research, not least with what is presented in this paper. As previously mentioned, he also points out that he was surprised by the similarity and correspondence.<sup>59</sup> A fully satisfactory future account of Johnsen's ecotheology, however, should analyse his thesis in detail with a view to discovering whether there are new elements or reasoning in it. This analysis would call for research beyond the scope of what can be achieved in this article.

### Conclusion: evaluation of Sámi ecotheology

What are the commonalities and differences in the ecotheology of Bientie and Johnsen? The reviews in this article have shown that the differences between the two Sámi priests lie more in the number of texts they have published and choice of genre than in their conclusions. Bientie has written one short article that is more of a pastoral reflection than a scientific article. Johnsen's publications are consistently more research based. However, in terms of their essential ideas, there are similarities between the two Sámi priests.

Both emphasize motifs that stress the connection between nature, humanity, and the divine. Both theologians are more concerned with ontology and cosmology than ethical practice.

Another shared feature is that both are concerned with the notion that nature has spiritual dimensions. The divine is present in nature; all living things are subjects, and this must be reflected in how we think and act when dealing with non-human nature and the landscape. Although the two Sámi ecotheologians do not state as much explicitly,



they imply a theo-ecocentric ethics. The epistemological foundations for the Sámi ecotheologians are the Bible (theocentric sources) and knowledge imparted by the Sámi (anthropocentric sources). Indirectly, both theologians advocate listening, learning, and being in dialogue with nature. They argue for a more biocentric epistemology and ethics.

In the study *Church, Environment and Sustainability* (2019), I have shown how the Synod of the CoN and the Bishop's Councils have exalted the stewardship motif as the main ecotheological motif of the CoN.<sup>60</sup> The motif is ethically oriented and emphasizes that ethical responsibility for the environment is given by God. The weaknesses of stewardship motifs are many. According to Claire Palmer, the motif invites a conception in which humans are placed above and outside the rest of creation and an instrumentalist view of nature, says nothing about how humans should act in ethical conflicts, and has a weak biblical foundation.<sup>61</sup> The motif also tends to motivate us to focus on the wellbeing of human beings. This partly explains why the ecotheological statements by the CoN are, to a large extent, focused on problems that directly affect human wellbeing. The Synod and the Bishops' Council in the CoN have to a large extent, focused on environmental problems that affect humans directly; they have had less to say about environmental problems that do not affect humans directly to the same degree (cf. nature conservation, protection of animals, plants, and landscape and more). In other words, the CoN's environmental ethics are theo-anthropocentrically oriented. In this context, I am convinced that Bientie and Johnsen represent a different approach. The motifs and approaches of the Sámi theologians suggest an ecocentric intransitive approach: an ecotheology which emphasizes the unity of human beings, nature, and God. The strength of this approach is that it underscores the importance of the connection between everything that lives. It provides an impetus to protect non-human nature.<sup>62</sup> Thus, as presented by Bientie and Johnsen, Sámi ecotheology challenges the CoN to place greater emphasis on non-human nature and make a greater commitment to biodiversity and landscape than it has hitherto done.

Having said this, it must be emphasized that the examination of the theology of these two Sámi priests provides too weak a basis to be able to generalize and say anything certain about Sámi ecotheology as a whole. In order to gain a more complete picture, further studies of both other contemporary Sámi theologians, such as the previously mentioned Jernsletten and Sjöberg, and of the theology in statements made by the Sámi church council are needed.



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## Notes

1. Tomren, "The Articles," 32.
2. World Council of Churches, *Message*.
3. Cf. Kirkemøte, *Protokoll Kirkemøtet*, 106.
4. Tomren, *Kyrkje, miljø og berekraft*.
5. Cf. Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies*, 217–27; Wilson, *Research is Ceremony*, 50–4.
6. Johnsen, "Contribution of North Sami," 41.
7. *Ibid.*, 26.
8. Cf. Jernsletten, "Relasjoner"; Sjöberg, "Adams barn tillsammans," 22–34.
9. Cf. Kristiansen, "Samisk religion;" Bergman, "Så främmande det lika;" Vähäkangas, "Lars Levi Læstadius."
10. Johnsen, "The Contribution," 26.
11. Tomren, "How Green was Martin?" 82–5.
12. Cf. Horrell, "Introduction," 7–9; Glotfield, "Introduction," xviii–xx and Tomren, "Climate Strikes and Curricula," 106–7.
13. Tomren, *Kyrkje, miljø og berekraft*, 25.
14. Tomren, "How Green was Martin?" 82–9; Tomren, *Kyrkje, miljø og berekraft*, 18–25.
15. Tomren, "The Articles," 89.
16. Northcott, *The Environment*, 124–61.
17. Brander, *Människan*, 11–12.
18. Santmire, *Nature Reborn*, 6–10.
19. Bientie, "Det er landet," 134–41.
20. Translation of the Norwegian title: *Staloer tror at månen er blå: Samisk eventyr gjenfortalt av Kirsti Birkeland*. Birkeland.
21. Bientie, "Det er landet," 135.
22. *Ibid.*
23. Bientie, "Det er landet"; cf. Turi, *An Account*.
24. Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, 239 ff.
25. Bientie, "Det er landet," 141.
26. Brander, *Människan*, 11–12.
27. Translated from the Norwegian title: *Hellig ord om hellig jord: Naturen i våre kristedomstradisjoner*. Bientie.
28. Tomren, *Kyrkje, miljø og berekraft*, 246.
29. Cf. Gustafson, *Ethics*, 95–113.
30. Bientie, "Det er landet," 141.
31. Santmire, *Nature Reborn*, 7–8.
32. Johnsen, "Teologi fra livets sirkel," 213–24.

33. Ibid., 213–24.
34. Ibid., 213–5.
35. cf. White Jr., “The Historical Roots.”
36. Johnsen, “Teologi fra livets sirkel,” 213–5.
37. Ibid., 217–8.
38. Ibid., 214–7.
39. Ibid., 217.
40. cf. Santmire, *Nature Reborn*, 7–8.
41. Johnsen, “Teologi fra livets sirkel,” 219.
42. Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 102–3.
43. Johnsen, “Teologi fra livets sirkel,” 220–4.
44. Johnsen, *Jordens barn, solens barn*, 3.
45. Ibid., 31–47.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid., 140–57.
48. Ibid., 145.
49. Johnsen, *Sámi luondduteologiiija*, 7.
50. Buljo, “Samiske skikker/tradisjoner,” 30–6.
51. Cf. Oskal, “Det rette, det gode,” 85–105.
52. Johnsen, *Sámi luondduteologiiija*, 44.
53. Kristiansen, “Religion i kontekst,” 79–91; cf. Johnsen, *Sámi luondduteologiiija*, 41.
54. Johnsen, *Sámi luondduteologiiija*, 48.
55. Ibid., 49–50.
56. Ibid., 50.
57. Cf. Oskal, “Det rette, det gode,” 85–105.
58. Johnsen, *Sámi Nature-Centered Christianity*.
59. Johnsen, “The Contribution,” 188.
60. Tomren, *Kyrkje, miljø og berekraft*; Tomren, “Kirken og miljølære”.
61. Palmer, “Stewardship,” 66.
62. Northcott, *The Environment*, 147–61.

### *Disclosure statement*

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