Abstract

From a Sami perspective, this article discusses how Scandinavian creation theology can support a stronger resilience against that which threatens the creation in all its variations. Sápmi is the land of the Indigenous Sami people in the northern part of Scandinavia and Kola peninsula in Russia. During the 19th and 20th century the Norwegian part of Sápmi was colonized in the so-called Norwegianization project. Today we see an increasing battle around natural resources. The article briefly depicts Sami indigenous theology, which emphasizes the circle of life, creation, and humanity’s relationship within the creation and its Creator. It then presents several basic features of Scandinavian creation theology that highlight the egalitarianism surrounding the creation and how all people stand in relation to this with an ethical obligation to defend life where it is threatened.

KEYWORDS
Grundtvig, indigenous theology, Løgstrup, Sapmi, Scandinavian creation theology

1 | INTRODUCTION

In the High North at my hometown in Pasvik, in the Norwegian part of the multicultural border valley between Russia in the east and Finland in the west, a portrait hanging in the school’s main classroom sticks out. The portrait is of Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig, a Danish hymn writer, priest, and a founding figure of Scandinavian creation theology. Some may argue that it is strange to see the portrait of a dead Danish hymn writer at a relatively new public school in an area where the Sami and Finnish languages and cultures have enjoyed greater prominence than Danish hymn singing. Nevertheless, there is perhaps an indirect connection between Grundtvigian theology and the Sami relational view of the link between the Creator and the creation that possibly explains why the portrait of Grundtvig has a prominent place in the school, despite the strong secularization of the Norwegian education system.

This article first briefly depicts the Sami Indigenous theology, which emphasizes the circle of life, creation, and humanity’s relationship within the creation and its Creator. It then presents several basic features of Scandinavian creation theology that highlight the egalitarianism surrounding creation and how all people stand in relation to this with an ethical obligation to defend life whenever it is threatened. Relying on the Sami perspective on creation and relations, this article discusses how Scandinavian creation theology can develop resilience against factors that threaten creation in all its variations.

Sápmi, the land of the Sami people, comprises the northernmost areas of Norway, Sweden, Finland, and the Kola Peninsula in northwest Russia. By its Constitution, Norway is a country of two peoples: the Norwegians and the Indigenous Sami people. The State of Norway was built and continues to exist on the land of the Sami people through an extensive colonialization project, also called
Norwegianization, which includes changes in industrial roads, forced language transition into Norwegian, and requirements for Sami people and the Finnish immigrant populations (called Kven people) to change their names in order to own land. Today, the Kven people are considered national minorities in Norway, whereas the Sami people are considered both national minorities and Indigenous people protected by national and international human rights laws.

The borders of the modern national states have split our land and made demands for strong national loyalty in the exposed border areas in the North. The Norwegian State Church has played an active role on behalf of the oppressors and through its previous supervision of, for example, schools, has done its part to eradicate the Sami language and culture from large sections of Sami communities. Caroline Serck-Hansen pointed out how the Skolt Sami areas around the Pasvik river developed a practical Christian Orthodox faith. This Christianity never received much recognition from the Church and Protestant missionaries. Thomas von Westen (1682–1727), a Norwegian priest who is often described by the Norwegian majority church as the Apostle to the Sámi, wondered whether the Skolt Sami could be described as Christians at all. Only by word, not in real life, could they be called Christians.

Disputes over natural resources have been on the rise in recent times. Capital interests seek to take away grazing areas for reindeer and other Sami traditional industries, which are threatened by the construction of new wind turbines, a new mining industry, and a railway project that aims at connecting Asia and Europe through the so-called Northern Sea Route. A common argument in endorsement of many of these projects is that they are necessary to implement the “green shift,” as though it is the Sami traditional way of living that has created the current climate crisis. Similarly, the geopolitical tensions in the North between East and West and the refugee situation in 2015, when 5000 refugees crossed the Norwegian–Russian border on bicycles often set aside local demands for cross-border cooperation between East and West and a practice that promote humanity and solidarity with refugees.

Scandinavian creation theology was developed far away from our Sami areas, but there are elements of this theology that can be helpful in developing more ethical and societal aspects of international and interpersonal relations.

2 SAMI PERSPECTIVES ON CREATION, RELATION, AND BLESSINGS

From a Sami point of view, the relationship with creation (not only the human aspect, but all of nature) is both a spiritual matter and a political issue as it is interwoven in our lives in Sapmi.

In the Norwegian context, the State Church has played an important role in colonizing the Sami communities—culturally, religiously, and economically. Tore Johnsen, a Sami theologian and researcher has highlighted how Indigenous people rarely received support from the Church regarding a spiritual defense of creation. Johnsen described how, among Indigenous peoples, the Church is perceived as part of the problem when the earth and creation are threatened. He also explained how the Church, by way of a politically justified creation theology forms the basis for the colonialization and exploitation of the earth.

As a response to this ecclesiastical and theological practice, it is important, Johnsen argued, to develop a theology and a theological practice that emphasizes the spirituality and lives of indigenous peoples, both intellectually and practically. Johnsen found inspiration for this approach from liberation theology, which prioritizes the life of the poor for theological interpretation. Using concepts like “God of the poor,” this theology develops that support and engages in a liberation struggle for justice through words and actions. As the starting point of liberation theology lies with the poor, Johnsen advocated the creation of a theology from the circle of life based on how Indigenous people understand the entire creation (people, animals, and nature) as a circle with God in the middle and the rest of creation standing in relation to each other. Placing God in the middle suggests a divine presence in everything.

The circle of life thus represents, according to Johnsen, an ideal situation. The different parts of creation are not separate from one another; everything is connected, and God is in everything. The ideal state is threatened as a result of human sin. Like in liberation theology, sin is structural rather than individual. The consequence of sin is that the circle of life is broken by the disconnection of people from God. The theological consequences also involve a shift in the starting point of the theological reflections, recognizing that the circle of life is broken. The aim of both people and theology is therefore to seek to restore this circle. This recovery is thus perceived, in the Sami context, as part of the Christian reconciliation project, in which the kingdom of God and eschatology constitute a restored circle.

Leading to the final recovery of the broken circle involves people repairing their relationships, as Sami researcher and former Associate Professor at Northern Norway Educational Centre of Practical Theology Jorunn Jernsletten, pointed out. People’s views on creation are closely linked to their relationships with other people, animals, and nature: “The whole of creation is God’s gift to us: every child that is born, every plant that grows out of the soil, every mountain that rises from the earth. Every
part of creation is proof that the Holy Spirit is present and still hovering over the surface of our world and presented among us.”

This basic view of creation has implications for how we should move in nature. Jernsletten referred to, for example, how one asks the spirits for permission when one wants to camp and make bonfires in the forest; and how luck, whether with fishing or reindeer herding, is closely related to how one acts toward others. If one gets along well with other people or behaves well in nature, one will also experience luck in these endeavors. Jernsletten wrote, “Your actions could turn back on you. This respect should also be shown in practical life.” She further argued how this view of non-human creatures has similarities with the Christian love of the other as expressed in Matthew 22:39: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” The Sami understanding of creation is that the created is sacred, as is the Creator herself, and cannot be separated from the Creator. Humanity’s love must therefore be directed toward creation as a whole. Jernsletten also highlighted how living things are all part of creation together and that people’s actions against other creatures are also acts against God.

Along the same lines, Lovisa Mienna Sjöberg, Associate Professor at Sami University College in Kautokeino, Norway, has described how blessings (in North-Sami sivndidit) is part of what it means to live. She explained that sivndidit can be understood as part of being human and living on earth. According to Sjöberg, life is a blessing, and as long as a person lives, he or she negotiates with the surroundings, striving to get along, and claims that the ideal is to have good relationships with other people, creations, and the ground under one’s feet (ibid).

The dialogue between Sami and Norwegian Christian theology is interesting. This is especially because throughout history, the Norwegian Majority Church has considered Sami theology something that lies either on the side of Christianity, or that is completely different. Implementing a dialogue in which one assumes that Sami Indigenous Christianity is also Christian theology, and is therefore of paramount importance. Johnsen’s central goal is to break from the perception of the majority communities within Christianity of the Sami Indigenous Christianity as something different from what can be considered Christian faith. In the article Dialogteologi i et samisk perspektiv (2016) Johnsen claimed that the starting point for the Christian Church in the so-called dialogue with Sami Christians often has been a dialogue with the other, instead of a dialogue with itself. By setting up various dichotomies, the Norwegian majority church has undermined Sami spirituality.

According to Johnsen, the Church is not alone in building up around dichotomies. He pointed out that as language and thinking are structured around a larger set of value-charged dichotomies, an internal hierarchy of values arises in language and thinking. This is built into the language in a way that is most often hidden from the users of the language itself, which is what Derrida’s deconstruction uncovered. Examples of dichotomies that undermine Indigenous philosophy and understanding are human versus nature, culture versus nature, cultural people versus natural people, and civilized versus primitive souls. Sami traditional thinking never organized around the same dichotomies as did western philosophies. For example, nature is not a dichotomy to culture. Christian theology, after the Enlightenment, concentrated on what the Enlightenment philosophers called modern aspects, such as culture, being civilized, etc. Over generations, this has been built into the normative language of theology and has characterized the Church’s gaze on Sami spirituality.

A central concern for Johnsen is that of developing a dialogue between the understanding of Sami Christianity and the Christianity of the Majority Church of Norway, which is not about establishing a dialogue that builds on an understanding of classical conversion thinking, where Sami spirituality is defined as something that existed before Christianity. Johnsen instead advocated a dialogue that probes between different Christian traditions that more widely recognize understandings of Christianity as characterized by traditional and secular cosmologies.

3 A POLITICAL THEOLOGY OF CREATION

While reading Scandinavian creation theology from a Sami perspective, it is important to be aware that we have a different history and traditions from the rest of Scandinavia and the universities where this creation theology was developed in the past.

The basic tenet of Scandinavian creation theology is centered on people and their place in creation. According to Elisabeth Gerle, this means that this theology does not consider people mere individuals, and also rejects a narrow version of society that excludes people. Rather, humans live in relation to other people, the entire creation, and God.

With this foundation, it is possible to analyze the ethical aspects of policies pertaining to people and nature. Gerle, however, extended her perspective beyond an ethical reflection in that Scandinavian creation theology challenges humanity to act. Hence, she examined creation theology as part of her main project of challenging people toward action. This theology does not call on people to be divine, but rather to become compassionate. Gerle emphasize this by showing how Scandinavian creation theology perceives God as working through people’s hands, lips,
ears, and so on. She concluded that life is relational and human beings are connected to more than their nationality, ethnicity, or religious community, and that they are not just rational beings. The goal in life is not, Gerle claimed, to reach divinity, but to rebuild and expand the human experience on earth. Through this, Gerle believed that incarnation, as Scandinavian creation theology perceives it, is an opening toward other cultures.

Gerle elaborated on these ideas in her article titled “Becoming Fully Human: Passionate Mutualism and Life and Resistance” (2020), which argues that creation does not represent anything final, such as a created order, but is rather an ongoing process. This can be explained neither historically nor scientifically, according to Gerle. However, this point of view is supported by the understanding that creation is constantly in a state of renewal. To substantiate this from a theological standpoint, Gerle discussed how Luther claimed that God constantly renews life. She highlighted how the creation theology presented by Gustaf Wingren assessed the relationship between fixed structures and orders and changing structures or theological hierarchical orders. “Structures and borders are important,” claimed Gerle, but they are not static and can therefore be changed. A fundamental perspective in Scandinavian creation theology is to simply recognize that one exists in society along with others.

Gerle argued that a central issue for Grundtvig was the close connection between creation and blessing, which together help promote humanization. This is not an individualistic project, but rather a matter of a collective concern. When humanization becomes a part of something more than oneself, it is possible for one to stand up for the Other, because the Other has a “right to protection and right to self-expression.” When this aspect of blessing and salvation are combined together with the protection of the Other, one develops what Gerle described as liberating vision.

What if the Other is not only another human being, but all of creation? What can the Scandinavian creation theology tell us then? Gerle’s basic challenge was about resisting ethnocentric and patriarchal interpretations of nationalism that legitimize the dehumanization of the Other. Gerle tried to develop a theological language that can serve as a source of inspiration for change and resistance. According to Gerle, the Scandinavian creation theology serves as a source of resistance to dehumanization by recognizing that all humans are created by God, in God’s image. Based on Grundtvig’s reasoning, this has the potential to expand into a theology that encompasses the entire earth.

In contemporary times, this Grundtvigian point of view is important. Gerle wrote that in an era of growing neoliberalism that threatens society, this continuous blessing is a theological premise for standing up for human dignity that inspires resistance against the dehumanization of the Other. Scandinavian creation theology posits that all people, regardless of faith, religion, and so on, are created equal and are an equal part of life. This becomes a theological language with which one can insist that equal rights for all people are rooted in the belief that God is the Creator of all life.

Trygve Wyller discussed this further and focused on how all people are parts of the same creation, a perspective that Scandinavian creation theology shares with, for example, postcolonial theology. This perspective also contrasts with that of “mainstream mission theology,” which does not recognize indigenous people “as part of Christendom,” as Thomas von Westen (as mentioned above) among others, represented. By explicitly acknowledging the gaze of the Other, Scandinavian creation theology rejects the notion that there are people who lie outside of God’s love. Wyller emphasized this by showing how this also has some ecclesiastical implications, by claiming that a “decentered Lutheran ecclesiology, creation theology, and the centering of the subaltern belong together.”

When Scandinavian creation theology defends the Other and creation it also implies the confronting of structures that threaten life. The Danish theologian Knut Ejer Løgstrup reviewed Luther’s attack on this idea of envisioning other social models. For Løgstrup, Luther’s condemnation of the peasant rebellion against their oppressors was problematic. Løgstrup believed that the right to rebel is fundamental and connected to unequal distributions of power and wealth. He wrote that in such a situation, striving for equality is the same as newly arranging a social model together in a Utopian manner. This contradicts Luther, who considered the idea of confronting basic social structures far-fetched. In contrast, Løgstrup concluded that people in such situations not only have a right, but also an ethical duty to resist. He restricted this duty to situations in which people’s lives are threatened or they are at risk of losing their humanity, but did not specify what constitutes such situations. However, given the radical content of this ethical demand, one may state that such situations occur when forces intervene in the fundamental aspects of being human.

4 | DISCUSSION

Neither Scandinavian creation theology nor Sami religious practices have an explicit political goal. Nevertheless, the theology expressed in both has several significant ethical and political implications in view of both society and requirements for social development, as neither theology excludes these from creation: creation encompasses
everything, and the close link between the creation and its Creator makes everything sacred.

It may seem like there is a disagreement between Johnsen and Wyller with respect to the effect that creation theology has had on societies that are far removed from the empire. Johnsen argued how creation theology played a decisive role in the Church’s justification for the colonialization of Sápmi. It had an anthropological approach that emphasized the development of natural resources and that this exploitation of nature has brought the world into a state of disarray. However, Wyller believed that what he called mainstream mission theology had never recognized indigenous people as part of Christianity. Thus, I find it difficult to see a significant contradiction between the circle of life concept and how Scandinavian creation theology deals with the connection within the creation and to the Creator.

The problem may lie with whom the theology is targeting, who or what is subject to theological reflection, and where it occurs. Johnsen’s starting point is the broken circle of life, and the goal is to bring the circle back together. For him, this recreation is a focal point in atonement, and the restored circle constitutes a kind of eschatology or the kingdom of God. Jernsletten and Sjöberg introduced a middle position reflecting modern life, and how humans must get along with both each other and creation as a whole. People thus have a responsibility to stand up for creation and act in society and nature as though they are traveling through. Sami theology seems to go a bit further than Scandinavian creation theology in its view of how the Other is understood as more than just the human Other, yet this is not a contradiction, but a supplementary view. Gerle, for example, also emphasized the relational and views creation as representing a form of equality between the created and the Creator.

In a Sami context, Scandinavian creation theology makes an important contribution in the formulation of theological vocabulary for an ongoing social struggle wherein natural resources are under pressure and there is a need to defend life against dehumanization. Scandinavian creation theology makes an important contribution in forming theological languages for social struggle and defending life.

Where Scandinavian creation theology comes to fruition is in developing both analytical tools that address injustice and an ethical understanding that can be part of a social struggle. This involves three factors. First, as Scandinavian creation theology does not operate with a distinction between the sacred and the secular, it can be applied to many areas when it comes to the struggle for natural resources and solidarity with refugees. It is so explicit in its view of the Other and the rejection of dehumanization that it becomes possible to analyze, for example, what borders, geopolitical tensions, and issues with refugees represent in our surroundings. Second, Scandinavian creation theology has, as noted, a perspective that transcends the purely human in creation: everything created relates to each other and has mutual solidarity with and responsibility toward one another. Third, as Scandinavian creation theology is dismissive of traditional theological hierarchies, and this also implies that it is equally challenging to other social structures that contribute toward oppression. Scandinavian creation theology emphasizes, as Logstrup stated, how one not only has a right but also a duty to resist when life is threatened. This allows for theologically justified activism in several areas of society, perhaps especially in the conflict-ridden places that were mentioned initially. It may also be that Sami Indigenous and Scandinavian creation theologies best meet as ethical commitments to get along with others and all of creation, while making active choices through which we can contribute toward change.

5 | RESTORING HUMANITY & CREATION

Scandinavian creation theology originated in Denmark, with the Danish nineteenth century figure, Grundtvig, far away from our mountains, rivers, and forests in Sápmi. When Scandinavian creation theology has a sounding board in our areas, this is probably related to how later representatives, such as Logstrup, Gerle, and Wyller, continued to build on his theological tradition to address ethical and social challenges, emphasizing how the aim of theology is to restore humanity and creation when life itself is threatened. It is perhaps in light of this ongoing renewal of his tradition that the portrait of Grundtvig is still hanging safely in a public school in Scandinavia’s northernmost outpost.

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How to cite this article: Webber TB. Creation and relations — A sami perspective on scandinavian creation theology. Dialog. 2021;60:155–160. https://doi.org/10.1111/dial.12666