

Article

Renegotiating Relations, Structuring Justice: Institutional Reconciliation with the Saami in the 1990–2020 Reconciliation Processes of the Church of Sweden and the Church of Norway

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Abstract: Social reconciliation has received much attention in Christian churches since the late 1980s. Both the Church of Sweden and the Church of Norway initiated reconciliation processes with the Saami (also “Sami” or “Sámi”), the indigenous people of Northern Europe, at the beginning of the 1990s. As former state churches, they bear the colonial burden of having converted the Saami to Lutheranism. To make amends for their excesses in the missionary field, both Scandinavian churches have aimed at structural changes to include Saaminess in their church identities. In this article, I examine how the Church of Sweden and the Church of Norway understand reconciliation in relation to the Saami in their own church documents using conceptual analysis. I argue that the Church of Sweden treats reconciliation primarily as a secular concept without binding it to the doctrine of reconciliation, making the Church’s agenda theologically weak, whereas the Church of Norway utilizes Christian resources in its comprehensive approach to reconciliation with the Saami. This article shows both the challenges and contributions of the Church of Sweden and the Church of Norway to the hotly debated discussions on truth and reconciliation in the Nordic Saami context.

Keywords: colonialism; Christianity; institutional reconciliation; justice; Saami people; Church of Norway; Church of Sweden

1. Introduction: Churches Confront Their Participation in the Colonial Oppression of the Saami

On 25 March 2001, an intriguing act took place in the Undersåker¹ district, in Jämtland County, Sweden. At the Undersåker church, the then bishop of the Härnösand diocese, Karl-Johan Tyrberg, acknowledged that the Church of Sweden had perpetrated injustices against the Saami in its missionary activities:

Today, in the diocese of Härnösand, we explicitly want to express the lack of trust, openness and respect that has characterized many of the Church of Sweden’s relations with the Saami people. In our history, we have contributed to preserving prejudices about Saami life and thereby reinforcing people’s vulnerability. —As a church, we acknowledge that we are part of the guilt that stems from the past. (Engvall 2003, pp. 8–9)

Tyrberg’s public pardon has been considered an important milestone in relations between the Church and the Saami of Sweden (Nordbäck 2016, p. 135). The same has been said in my native

¹ *Såahka* in South Saami language.

Finland² about the public apology offered by the then bishop of the Oulu diocese, Samuel Salmi, in February 2012 on behalf of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. Salmi apologized for the church's racial misconduct towards the Saami (Lehtola 2016, pp. 1085–87). Such public acts are reflective of the ongoing discussion about the roles of the Christian churches in the colonization of the indigenous Saami (also “Sami” or “Sámi”)³ people.⁴ The debate will only become more amplified during the upcoming decade, since the Nordic countries traditionally inhabited by the Saami—Sweden, Norway, and Finland—will hold their first national Truth and Reconciliation Commissions to examine the forced assimilation of and discrimination against the Saami (Kuokkanen 2020; TRC Finland 2020; TRC Norway 2020; TRC Sweden 2019). The former state churches' roles in these histories are in many respects yet to be fully revealed.

The Saami people⁵ traditionally live in Sweden, Norway, Finland, and also Russia, making the realities impacting the Saami international, multifaceted, and multilingual in scope. Despite the many similarities they share with each other—for example, experiences of residential schools—the Saami communities differ in terms of livelihoods, languages,⁶ local histories, even religious denominations. In Finland, the Saami historically belong to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland and the Orthodox Church of Finland.⁷ For methodological reasons, I will not include these churches in my analysis, since not enough textual sources have been produced by the two Finnish churches regarding the idea of reconciling with the Saami.⁸ For example, the above-mentioned speech by Bishop Salmi has not been documented or published by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland; parts of it have been reconstructed from quotations written by journalists who covered the apology in the Finnish media. The Saami reconciliation patterns in the Church of Sweden and the Church of Norway resemble each other more closely, yet they are not identical.

This begs the question, how is the following analysis relevant for religious studies? First, given the underlying tensions and the ongoing political developments, it is topical to examine how the Church of Sweden and the Church of Norway conceptualize reconciliation with the Saami and how they contribute to discussions on the need to redress the past. Secondly, it is relevant to examine whether and how the churches utilize Christian heritage for reconciliation, especially since it is such a key category for Christian churches and theology (Nordbäck 2016, pp. 141–42). Thirdly, this analysis may be useful as a heuristic tool when evaluating the success of reconciliation processes in the Saami context.

² The author of this article is a Teno river Saami from Northern Finland, Utsjoki. Northern Saami is her mother tongue, and she is a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland. Her Saami Christian roots are in the Laestadian movement and its branch called the Firstborn.

³ In this article, I use the form “Saami” since I regard it the most reader-friendly alternative of the three forms (“Saami”, “Sami”, “Sámi”) that are currently being used in English. In the document “Strategic Plan for Sami Church Life”, the variation “Sami” is used, and I have kept the original form when quoting from the document.

⁴ The Saami were first recognized as an indigenous people in 1977 in Sweden, in 1990 in Norway, and in 1995 in Finland (Finlex 1999; Regjeringen 2020; Sveriges riksdag 1977). In Russia, the Saami belong to “the group of Northern nations who are few in number” (*korennye maločislennye narody severa*) (Saarikivi 2016, p. 9).

⁵ It is estimated that the number of Saami has remained relatively the same, with 45,000–50,000 in Norway, 15,000–20,000 in Sweden, 10,000 in Finland, and 2000 in Russia. However, the figures should be viewed critically. In the Nordic countries, the question of who among the more-or-less assimilated Saami should be officially defined as Saami is contested (Seurujärvi-Kari 2011, pp. 13–14; Saarikivi 2016, p. 9).

⁶ Of the approximately 70,000 to 80,000 Saami, less than half are thought to speak one of the Saami languages. The Saami languages belong to the Uralic language family. The languages differ so much from each other that linguistics has traditionally divided them into ten Saami languages. The western Saami languages include Southern, Ume, Lule, Pite, and Northern Saami, while the eastern languages include Inari, Skolt, Kildin, and Ter Saami, as well as the recently extinct Akkala Saami in Russia. All Saami languages are on the UNESCO list of endangered languages (Church of Norway 2011, p. 16; Kulonen 2014; Kulonen 2015; Porsanger 2015; Seurujärvi-Kari 2011, p. 20).

⁷ In Sweden, the Saami have traditionally belonged to—in addition to the Church of Sweden—the Mission Covenant Church of Sweden. In 2011, it merged with the Baptist Union of Sweden and the United Methodist Church of Sweden. The denomination is now called the Uniting Church of Sweden (*Equmeniakyrkan*) (Ekström 2006, pp. 118–119; Uniting Church of Sweden 2014).

⁸ However, it should not be concluded that the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland and the Orthodox Church of Finland have not engaged in any reconciliation processes with the Saami. Either way, written reflection on reconciliation has not been of a priority in these churches.

If the matter of reconciliation is handled only via an apology, then it unnecessarily narrows the idea of reconciliation. For instance, Fanie Du Toit has proposed that reconciliation should be perceived as a rather undefined process (du Toit 2002, cited in Tombs 2017, p. 120). However, applying a loose definition of reconciliation to Christian churches may prove tricky because the concept itself is so complex, ambiguous, and heavily laden with theological meaning and legacy (Baum 1997, pp. 188–89; de Gruchy 2002, p. 14). To borrow from indigenous notions of a trickster figure, the moment that you presume to know what form reconciliation should take, it is transformed before you even notice that your grip on its tale has slipped. Therefore, the approach used in this article is contextual and the central question builds on the work of John W. de Gruchy (de Gruchy 2002, pp. 21–22, 31, 153): What does reconciliation mean as a concrete process?

The type of reconciliation analyzed here is called institutional reconciliation, as opposed to other types of social reconciliation: interpersonal, intergroup, national, or international reconciliation. By institutional reconciliation, I mean a form of social reconciliation that concerns people or peoples and their relations to an institution that initiates a compensational process as a result of their having suffered—or continuing to suffer—from structural violence caused by the institution. According to the Oxford Dictionary, an “institution” is a “society or organization founded for a religious, educational, social, or similar purpose” and an “established official organization having an important role in the life of a country” (Oxford Dictionary 2020). The English word “reconciliation” (derived from the Latin word “reconciliatio”) (de Gruchy 2002, p. 24) carries with it the idea of estranged parties attempting to put a stop to enmity and restore friendly relations (Cambridge Dictionary 2020). In a multicultural setting, some indigenous representatives contest whether the word is the best alternative in an indigenous context if one assumes that the notion of “re-conciliation” presupposes an idea of returning to a previous (historical) relationship one would not want to restore (Sterritt 2019). The reason why I use the term “reconciliation” in this article is that it is the standard translation of the Swedish word “försoning” and the Norwegian word “forsoning”,⁹ the words that the Church of Sweden and the Church of Norway use in their church-Saami documents.

The Church of Sweden and the Church of Norway are evangelical Lutheran denominations of Protestant Christianity and the largest Christian communities in their respective countries.¹⁰ Public reflection on the need for reconciliation with the Saami started on a national level in the Church of Norway in the 1980s and in the Church of Sweden at the beginning of the 1990s (Church of Norway 2011, p. 20; Ekström 2006, pp. 145–53). From a historical perspective, Tore Johnsen in Norway and Carola Nordbäck, Daniel Lindmark, Karl-Johan Tyrberg, and Olle Sundström in Sweden have written about these processes (Johnsen 2012; Johnsen 2013; Johnsen 2017; Nordbäck 2016; Lindmark and Sundström 2016; Tyrberg 2013). In brief, the Church-Saami dialogues have shaped the understanding of reconciliation adopted on a national level both in the Church of Sweden and in the Church of Norway. A closer study of the internal church dialogues taking place between the Saami and Church representatives is beyond the scope of this article.

The reason for limiting the scope is methodological. There are two principal pathways to constructing a conceptual understanding of reconciliation discussions occurring in the Church of Sweden and in the Church of Norway: a broad and a narrow approach. The broad approach focuses on Church processes, like dialogues, ecumenism, ideological influences, and structures, to obtain a

⁹ The Swedish word “försoning” has similar meanings as the English word “reconciliation”. However, “försoning” can be interpreted as broader in scope and also conveying meanings more in line with the English word “atonement”. The same cannot necessarily be said about the Norwegian “forsoning”, since in a Norwegian context it would be more natural to use the word “soning” when referring to “atonement”. Nevertheless, for practical purposes the relationship between “reconciliation”, “försoning”, and “forsoning” is semantically quite close (Academic Norwegian Dictionary n.d.; Free Dictionary by Farlex 2020; Swedish-English Dictionary 2020).

¹⁰ Both churches have also recently gone through a considerable structural change concerning their legal church-state relationships. With the Church of Sweden, the transition happened in 2000, and in 2012 for the Church of Norway (Church of Norway Official Website 2020a; Church of Sweden Official Website 2020a).

broader view on reconciliation with the Saami, whereas the narrow approach focuses solely on written articulations and the reasoning underpinning reconciliation discussions. These two layers, naturally, are intertwined.

Despite the fact that I refer to the latter approach as “narrow”, it does not mean that the approach is in any way insignificant or less important. Quite the contrary: by meticulously scrutinizing the written argumentation, it is possible to uncover hidden attitudes, contradictions, and deeper forms of reasoning that otherwise could remain undiscerned. Research on the Church-Saami reconciliation processes so far has primarily focused on processual steps, examining which historical events and ideologies led to the next stages, while theorizing on the different stages (Johnsen 2017; Lindmark and Sundström 2016; Nordbäck 2016). This is of utmost importance; however, this approach has been insufficient to answer the question of how the churches as institutional bodies conceptualize a process that is so relevant for Christian theology and ecclesiology—reconciliation. This article focuses on the narrow approach in a systematic attempt to analyze the theological reflections behind reconciliation in the Saami context.

The main research questions are as follows: How do the Church of Sweden and the Church of Norway understand and argue for reconciliation with respect to the Saami? How do they use theological resources to justify the need for reconciliation? Or, do they engage in theological reflection in the first place? In this article, I provide answers to these questions by analyzing written documents published by the Church of Sweden and the Church of Norway in the years 1990–2020. I will analyze their documentation by doing a thematic close reading of them, focusing especially on the parts where the churches explicate their ideas on reconciliation. Methodologically, I use conceptual analysis to tackle the nature of reconciliation as it is understood by the churches. The theological scrutiny of the texts employs theories on the theology of reconciliation and social reconciliation. In theology, social or horizontal reconciliation is referred to a process between individuals and/or groups, whereas vertical reconciliation refers to reconciliation between humankind and God (Schreiter 2005, pp. 1–2). The church documents have been written in Swedish (the Church of Sweden) and in Norwegian, Bokmål (the Church of Norway).¹¹ In this article, translations of direct quotations and the titles of documents from Swedish and Norwegian into English are done by the author. The first “Strategic plan for Sami church life in the Church of Norway” is an exception among the sources, since it has already been translated both into Northern Saami and English, and hence, direct quotations are taken from the English version.

The resolutions of the General Synod and the document “Strategic Plan for Sami Church Life” (*Strategiplan for samisk kirkeliv*) from 2011 and its revised version, “Strategic Plan for Saami Church Life 2019–2027” (*Strategiplan for samisk kirkeliv 2019–2027*) from 2019, are the most significant textual sources for understanding the Church of Norway’s position on the matter in question. The relevant sources shaping the Church of Sweden’s understanding of reconciliation with the Saami are, likewise, the resolutions and other documents relating to the General Synod. I will also use the following two reports: “From Curitiba to Jokkmokk” (*Från Curitiba till Jokkmokk*) from 1993 (hereinafter called the Jokkmokk report) and “Saami Questions in the Church of Sweden” (*Samiska frågor i Svenska kyrkan*) from 2006 (hereinafter called the document on Saami questions). In addition, I will use the aforementioned acknowledgement by Bishop Tyrberg, which can be found in its entirety¹² in the book *The Saami Church: The Time Is Now for Practical Solidarity with the Saami* (“Samisk kyrka: Nu är rätt tid för praktisk solidaritet med samerna”) published by the Church of Sweden in 2003.

¹¹ Archbishop Antje Jackelén’s forewords in the anthologies from 2016 and 2017 are provided in Swedish and in three Saami languages: Northern, Lule, and South Saami.

¹² Tyrberg’s short speech can also be found in its entirety in the following report: “Report Based on Sáagastallamat, a Conference on the Saami and the Church of Sweden in Kiruna on 11–13 October 2011” (*Rapport från Sáagastallamat, en konferens om samerna och Svenska kyrkan, i Kiruna den 11–13 oktober 2011*) (Tyrberg 2011, p. 50). Urban Engvall notes that the speech has also been published in the South Saami church magazine *Daerpies Dierie* (Engvall 2003, pp. 8–9).

In 2016, the Church of Sweden published a lengthy article collection called *Historical Relations between the Church of Sweden and the Saami* (“De historiska relationerna mellan Svenska kyrkan och samerna”).¹³ The 1135-page anthology (hereinafter called the anthology on historical relations) consists of 35 research articles that shed light on historical relations between the Church and the Saami. The following year (2017), the Church published a popular science publication on the first anthology titled *The Saami and the Church of Sweden: Basis for Church Reconciliation Work* (“Samerna och Svenska kyrkan: Underlag för kyrkligt försoningsarbete”), which “summarizes the results and offers tools for working in future conversations” (Church of Sweden Official Website 2020b). In 2018, another popular science anthology directed at an English audience was published: “The Sami and the Church of Sweden: Results from a White Paper Project”.¹⁴ Taken together, these three anthologies (spanning the years 2012–2017) formed the fruits of a general project called “the White Paper Project”.¹⁵ I will only make use of the prefaces from the anthology on historical relations and the popular science anthology from 2017 in my analysis,¹⁶ both written by Archbishop Antje Jackelén, where she explains the motivations for commissioning the anthologies (Jackelén 2016, pp. 11–12; Jackelén 2017, pp. 7–9).

What is worth noting here is that the Church of Sweden had not authorized any of the White Paper Project anthologies by the General Synod or other church bodies. This is somewhat confusing, since generally a white paper constitutes an authoritative document in which an institution or a government provides an official policy or solution for a certain subject (Collins English Dictionary 2020). Even though the General Synod is the body with the highest decision-making power, the foremost representative in the Church of Sweden is the archbishop (Church of Sweden Official Website n.d.). Thus, I consider Jackelén’s forewords to present the Church’s own voice on the matter, whereas the actual articles in the anthologies represent the voices of researchers and/or Church figures irrespective of whether some of the writers have been involved in the Church-Saami reconciliation processes.¹⁷

The question of *who* represents the Church as an institution is not trivial, especially when the aim of this study is to answer the question of *how* the churches of Sweden and Norway comprehend reconciliation in their Saami relations. In providing a meaningful answer to the research question, the broader question of *what* the Church is, and more specifically, who speaks with the official voice of the churches cannot be disregarded. Both in the Church of Sweden and in the Church of Norway the General Synod is the body with the highest decision-making power (Church of Norway Official Website 2020b; Church of Sweden Official Website n.d.). This means that the resolutions by the General Synods form a focal part in my analysis. The above-mentioned reports—except the White Paper Project documents—have been accepted either by the church councils with executive power or by the dioceses, both of which speak with the ecclesiastical voice of the respective churches. However, other alternatives exist for outlining the relevant voices. Especially in the case of the Church of Sweden, strictly delineating

¹³ During the same year, the Church of Sweden also published another book concerning the Saami and the Church of Sweden called *When I Was Eight Years Old, I Left My Home and Have Not Yet Returned: Reflections from the Saami School Time* (“När jag var åtta år lämnade jag mitt hem och har ännu inte kommit tillbaka: Minnesbilder från samernas skoltid”) (Jackelén 2017, p. 7).

¹⁴ There are many differences between the Swedish and English popular science anthologies. The most relevant difference with respect to the overall aim of this article is that Archbishop Antje Jackelén’s foreword is not included in the English anthology. Thus, the English anthology is without any type of church authorization and should be viewed as an independent publication by its authors.

¹⁵ Interestingly—and parallel to the White Paper Project—the Theological Committee of the Church of Sweden published two anthologies concerning the theology of reconciliation and its social implications: *Tala om försoning: reflektioner över ett centralt tema i kristen teologi* in 2015 and *Liv i försoning: om upprättelse i kyrka och samhälle* in 2016 (Bokus 2020a; Bokus 2020b).

¹⁶ Some articles included in the anthologies are made use of in this article, but not as sources, unlike the forewords by Jackelén.

¹⁷ For the same reason, I will not include the following three reports in my analysis: (1) *Reconciliation Is a Way To Begin: Report from the Seminar about the Reconciliation Process between the Saami and the Church and its Historical Background* (“Försoning är ett sätt att börja om: Rapport från ett seminarium om försoningsprocessen mellan samer och kyrka och dess historiska bakgrund”) from 1999, (2) *The Saami Church: The Time Is Now for Practical Solidarity with the Saami* (“Samisk kyrka: Nu är rätt tid för praktisk solidaritet med samerna”) from 2003, and (3) *Report Based on Sägastallamat, a Conference on the Saami and the Church of Sweden in Kiruna on 11–13 October 2011* (“Rapport från Sägastallamat, en konferens om samerna och Svenska kyrkan, i Kiruna den 11–13 oktober 2011”) from 2011.

who officially speaks for the Church becomes complex, as later shown in this article. This article argues that although the two neighboring Lutheran folk churches share many characteristics with each other regarding the Church-Saami reconciliation processes, they differ greatly in how they perceive reconciliation towards and with the Saami.

2. A Broad Overview of the Church-Saami Reconciliation Processes: From Grassroot Dialogues to Structural Changes

The processes that comprise both Tyrberg's acknowledgement and the textual sources are formally called *the Church-Saami reconciliation processes*. They include the histories on establishing the Saami Church Councils first in the Church of Norway in 1993, then in the Church of Sweden in 1996, and finally in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland in 2009 (Church of Norway 2019, p. 35; Ekström 2006, pp. 49, 105; Niittyvuopio 2013, p. 155). By establishing the Saami Church Councils, the churches aimed to support and develop Saami church life¹⁸ and the severely endangered Saami languages. The Saami Church Councils play a significant role in the overall church-Saami reconciliation processes by creating space for dialogues between the Saami communities and the Lutheran churches. In practice, many of the churches' decisions and action plans relating to the Saami are based on grassroot dialogues with the Saami and pastoral experiences of Saami church life.¹⁹

On a broader scale, the ecumenical movement—especially with the emphasis for member churches to restore their relationships with indigenous peoples by World Council of Churches (WCC), Lutheran World Federation (LWF), and Conference of European Churches (CEC)—has inspired both the Church of Sweden's and the Church of Norway's Saami initiatives (Church of Norway 2011, pp. 31–32, 78; Church of Norway 2019, pp. 10–11; Ekström 2006, pp. 47, 83). Also, the two Scandinavian Lutheran churches have influenced one another; the Church of Norway's examples, in particular, have affected the Church of Sweden's approach to reconciling with the Saami (Ekström 2006, p. 156; Tyrberg 2013, p. 164).²⁰ Within the past few decades, the two Lutheran folk churches have been in a dialogue with one another over Saami matters, even collaborating to strengthen the South Saami²¹ church life and language (Church of Norway 2011, pp. 17, 77; Ekström 2006, p. 58).

By recognizing colonial oppression and injustices of the past, both the Church of Sweden and the Church of Norway are acknowledging wrongs done to the Saami as a result of Lutheran missionary activities since the 17th century. The Church of Norway has addressed the "demonizing and persecution of Sami religious concepts and practice", and the efforts where "Sami cultic drums were confiscated, and Sami holy places desecrated". Moreover, "the church's official attitude to Sami languages has varied in time with contemporary ideological trends" and Saami music—specifically the yoik—has been heavily stigmatized in the Laestadian Saami contexts (Church of Norway 2011, pp. 18–19, 23; Church of Norway 2019, pp. 38, 41). The Church of Sweden has not acknowledged such spiritual destruction, but it has addressed the unjust language policy and school system,²² racist biological studies, and the suppression of Saami identity (Ekström 2006, pp. 9, 25, 43–44, 83, 106–108; Engvall 2003, pp. 8–9). Both churches admit that their participation in the assimilation policy—Norwegianization and Swedification—caused them to suppress the Saami languages and cultures in line with contemporary ideology (Church of Norway 1997; Church of Norway 2006; Church of Norway 2011, pp. 8–9, 17–19, 24, 36–37, 40, 66; Church of Norway 2019, p. 35; Jackelén 2016, p. 11). The churches do not specify their

¹⁸ The Church of Norway proposes the following ecclesiastical account of Saami church life in the Norwegian context: "Sami church life in the Church of Norway is manifested when Sami, in the setting of the Church of Norway, rooted in the Sami people, and nurtured by Word and sacraments, participate in God's universal church with their own response to the gospel" (Church of Norway 2011, p. 37).

¹⁹ Some of the dialogues have been documented by both churches (Church of Sweden 2011; Steffenson).

²⁰ Norwegian Saami theologian and former General Secretary of the Saami Church Council of the Church of Norway Tore Johnsen has greatly influenced reconciliation theology in The White Paper Project (Lindmark and Sundström 2018, pp. 16–17).

²¹ The severely endangered South Saami language is spoken both in Norway and in Sweden.

²² In Sweden, cathedral chapters were responsible for the education of the Saami from 1526 until 1962 (Church of Sweden 1993, p. 33).

Saami audiences, meaning they do not identify to *whom* exactly they are directing their reconciliatory motifs. However, according to their action plans it seems that they are aiming to communicate with Saami communities in the areas now known as Sweden and Norway.²³ This means that their reconciliation processes are directed not only at their Saami church members, but also at a larger Saami audience.

What is worth noting in the Church-Saami reconciliation processes is the importance of distinguishing a fundamental shift in practice. Instead of proclaiming a one-way communication channel on reconciliation matters, the churches are publicly exploring the possibilities to reconcile—even to receive forgiveness—from the people they have suppressed. Furthermore, such institutional reconciliation is a challenge for Christian churches since it may call into question, even jeopardize, the Christian mission (Norheim 2019, p. 108). In the following chapters, I conceptually analyze how the Church of Sweden and the Church of Norway have seized upon such a challenge.

3. Narrowing the Scope: A Conceptual Analysis of Reconciliation in the Church of Sweden and Church of Norway in Relation to the Saami

3.1. Theoretical Tools to Tackle Reconciliation and Justice

The overarching theory used in this research adopts a distinction first provided by Dietrich Ritschl (Ritschl 1986), who discerned two levels of expression in the statements of reconciliation. First, a “primary level of expressions” deals with reconciliation through faith convictions, as a God-given reality (Ritschl 1986, cited in de Gruchy 2002, p. 18). Theologically, this means perceiving reconciliation as a soteriological concept of atonement that refers to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ who—according to Christian understanding—reconciled the relationship between God and humanity, a relationship previously broken by human sin and guilt (Beilby and Eddy 2008, p. 84; Schlenke 2011). However, such faith language may be out of place when uncritically linked to political discourse and equated with political reconciliation. As de Gruchy aptly puts it, this would only lead to “conceptual confusion” (de Gruchy 2002, p. 18).

A “secondary level of expressions”, in contrast, is closely bound with Christian understanding, but according to Ritschl the expressions are such that all “rational and responsible human beings” can relate to them, even if they do not agree with the Christian claims to reconciliation. Such expressions could, for example, refer to freeing the oppressed, healing the sorrowful and sick, or seeking justice and hope (Ritschl 1986, cited in de Gruchy 2002, pp. 18–19). Even if the secondary level of expressions is tied to the Christian worldview, a non-Christian can still have access to the content and language of such statements. The overriding question here is, how is the connection being built between the primary and secondary expressions of reconciliation? Or, phrased differently, how is the nexus made between the theological aspirations and practical contribution to public life? In addressing such issues, de Gruchy writes as follows:

The challenge in speaking about reconciliation from a Christian perspective is not simply that of proclaiming primary expressions of reconciliation but engaging in public life in ways that make God’s gift of reconciliation and Christian hope a reality through secondary expressions. (de Gruchy 2002, p. 19)

Both the Church of Sweden and the Church of Norway tie their understanding of reconciliation to the concept of “justice” (in Swedish *rättovisa* or *rättfärdighet*; in Norwegian *rettferdighet*), as will be discussed in more detail later. That is why it is necessary to take a closer look at how the churches explicate their ideas of justice at the Church-Saami reconciliation documents. As reconciliation, justice is by no means a univocal concept; rather, its meaning varies in different reconciliation processes.

²³ This concerns the Lule, Northern, and South Saami communities of Norway and Sweden. The Skolt Saami living in Norway, Finland, and Russia traditionally belong to the Orthodox churches of their countries (Kalkun et al. 2018, p. 6).

That is why Robert J. Schreiter has pointed out that it is precisely the complexity of the past that makes it crucial to clarify just what kind of justice is being aspired to in any reconciliation process (Schreiter 1998, pp. 121–123). For that purpose, I apply theoretical categorizations of justice to define the nature of institutional reconciliation with the Saami, first by the Church of Sweden and then by the Church of Norway.

3.2. Renegotiating Relations with the Saami: The Church of Sweden

3.2.1. Bishops Voicing the Need to Reconcile with the Saami

In general, the reports published by the Church of Sweden about its Saami relations mainly deal with Saami church history, language policies, and suggestions for enhancing Saami church life on a practical level while helping the Church reclaim its own history. This process can be viewed as a crucial truth-telling phase vital for truth and reconciliation commissions elsewhere as well (Nordquist 2017, pp. 48, 66–67; Schreiter 1998, p. 113). The Church, however, is not running a national truth and reconciliation process,²⁴ but instead aiming to reshape formal Church-Saami relations. How is the Church of Sweden then articulating its efforts at gaining pardon for past wrongs, its theological understanding of reconciliation, and the need for reconciling with the Saami?

The Jokkmokk report published in 1993 is one of the earliest documents by the Church of Sweden dealing with the Saami relations and the past.²⁵ It was inspired by a plea by the LWF and the WCC to their member churches to restore relations with indigenous peoples.²⁶ The Jokkmokk report states that “we acknowledge” that Church representatives have not always acted wisely towards the Saami and “from the righteousness point of view, there are reasons to ask for forgiveness of sins and seek redressing wherever possible” (Church of Sweden 1993, p. 34). While the term “reconciliation” does not yet appear in the recommendations, interestingly the report makes reference to “sins” by the Church, signifying a rare—if not the only—occasion when the Church of Sweden mentions the word “sin” in official Church-Saami reconciliation documents. The Jokkmokk recommendations can be viewed as a prototype of a public acknowledgment wherein an institution officially acknowledges discriminatory policies and practices.²⁷

Basically, there are only a few pages altogether of textual material wherein the Church of Sweden explicates the idea of reconciliation and uses the actual word “reconciliation”. To better identify and define its ecclesiastical voice on the matter, it is thus important to approach the research question by looking more closely at expressions by bishops on the matter. The highest decision-making body of the Church of Sweden—the General Synod—has not made any official theological argumentation about reconciliation with respect to the Saami. The General Synod’s decision paper, titled “The identity of the Saami people in the Church of Sweden”, only states that “the General Synod expressed its support for the coming year to celebrate regional worship services characterized by reconciliation and restoration” (Church of Sweden General Synod 2000).

The decision was made at the General Synod in 2000 as a response to a motion put forward by three bishops, Karl-Johan Tyrberg, bishop of Härnösand, Rune Backlund, bishop of Luleå, and Claes-Bertil

²⁴ I do not consider a national reconciliation process to fall into the category of institutional reconciliation. See my definition of the latter provided in the introduction.

²⁵ The report is an outcome of a conference held in Jokkmokk on 17–18 November 1992. The recommendations were drawn up by those participating in the conference. The list of participants is presented in the introduction of the report.

²⁶ In Curitiba, Brazil, the LWF held a general assembly and the resulting resolution urged member churches to give moral, political, and material help to indigenous peoples. This prompted the General Synod (then *ombudsmötet*) of the Church of Sweden in 1990 to commission a study about Swedish Saami church life. In 1991, in Canberra, Australia, the WCC repeated the message, urging member churches to examine their actions towards indigenous peoples (Church of Sweden 1993, pp. 1–2).

²⁷ According to Jeremy Bergen, “ecclesial repentance” is “the act in which church/denominational bodies makes official statements of repentance, apology, confession or requests for those things which were once official church policy or practices” (Bergen 2011, p. 3). The reason why I do not attach terms like “repentance”, “attitude”, or “guilt” to describe an institutional reconciliation is because I hesitate as to whether an institution can have such attitudes and emotions.

Ytterberg, bishop of Västerås, all from dioceses familiar with Saami realities. The aim of the motion—was to draw the General Synod’s attention to three areas where the Church should struggle together with the Saami to create “real reconciliation”:

- (1) Human view: The Christian message shows the equal value of all people. When the Church assigned the Saami less human value as a result of racial thinking and through the depreciation of the Saami culture, it did not clearly stand up for the rights of weaker persons, but contributed instead to a downgrading of their spirit through silence;
- (2) Language and spirituality: Faith must be expressed in one’s own mother tongue and with one’s own cultural symbolic language. The Church has in the past disparaged Saami symbols and has not been open to integrating Saami symbols into Christian religious life;
- (3) Legal and ethical issues: The Church has a prophetic mission to give a voice to those who cannot make their voice heard. The Church has not participated in the recognition of the injustices committed against the indigenous Saami people. As regards the customary rights to use land and water, the Church has not shown the path forward towards strengthening important ethical principles. (Backlund et al. 2000)

The three bishops then gave practical suggestions to the General Synod about how to reinforce Saami church life. One suggestion was to hold regional reconciliation services (Backlund et al. 2000). The Faith Committee²⁸ supported the motion, as did other committees (Church of Sweden Worship Committee Report 2000, sct. 8). The committee elaborated on its position as follows:

There is every reason for the Church of Sweden to critically examine its participation in the oppression of the Saami that deprived from of access to Saami languages, Saami history, and Saami cultural and religious traditions. —Ignorance and thoughtlessness have promoted prejudice and bitterness. The now-necessary reconciliation process must include knowledge seeking and personal meetings that can be deepened through joint prayer and worship. Specific regional reconciliation services can be important to confirm what has been achieved and further to encourage communion that is mutually enriching and deepening. (Church of Sweden Faith Committee Report 2000, sct. 14)

Overall, the theme of making amends for wrongs committed in the past characterized the Church of Sweden’s General Synod meeting in 2000, where Archbishop Karl Gustav Hammar gave the colorful opening speech. In the speech, Hammar listed various atrocities done in the name of Christian mission throughout the course of history. Moving from the Christian crusades to more contemporary oppressions of the Romany people and the Saami, Hammar clarified why it is necessary for the Church of Sweden, and for all churches, to take a critical look at the past. He argued that without this critical approach, the Church carries a burden that covers its role to witness God’s love and secret of reconciliation:

We—here and now—long for a lighter packaging, a packaging that makes me more free, free to serve, free to witness, free to be. (Hammar 2000)

As a result, the Church of Sweden has taken a clear stand in acknowledging its institutional responsibility for the oppression of the Saami and has stated that further examinations are needed. The anthology on historical relations from 2016 can especially be interpreted as a critical academic study in this regard (Jackelén 2017, pp. 7–8; Johnsen 2017, p. 108; Lindmark and Sundström 2016, p. 26). The wordings from 2000, however, represent a public acknowledgement wherein the Church

²⁸ In the Church of Sweden, bishops do not have a right to vote in the General Synod, but their role in the Faith Committee of the General Synod is significant. All bishops belong to the Faith Committee, which is chaired by an archbishop (Antila 2016, p. 247).

acknowledges that its prophetic voice has been used to exclude the Saami, their languages, identity, spirituality, and struggles for customary rights to use land and water.²⁹ Here, reconciliation takes on a human and social embodiment in a specific context addressing social structures that need to be redressed. In other words, reconciliation is not dealt with as a divine (vertical) matter; instead, it is very much characterized by a horizontal relationship between peoples or a group of peoples where the parties involved are a Christian community and the Saami, a historically marginalized people. Notably, reconciliation is always a relational term by nature regardless of whether it has to do with humanity and God, the restoration of interpersonal relations, or the renewal of society (de Gruchy 2002, pp. 2, 19; Nordquist 2017, pp. 22–23). However, there is no consensus regarding how to relate reconciliation to a political venue. Or—in more theological terms—there is no consensus regarding the relationship between the politics of reconciliation and Christian doctrine of reconciliation (de Gruchy 2002, p. 13).

The challenge becomes obvious when applying the theory on primary and secondary levels of expressions to the General Synod statements by the Church of Sweden on reconciliation, where no reference is made to the Christian doctrine of reconciliation. Hence, the language and argumentation are characterized by the secondary level of expressions: “ethical principles”, “oppression”, “racial thinking”, “degradation of the weaker”, and “customary rights” to use lands and waters. The Church claims for itself both a prophetic mission to give voice to the silenced and the Christian message about the equal value of all humans. However, these claims refer to social justice and Christian ethics rather than to primary statements on the given reality or reconciliation as decreed by the Christian God.

In addition to the General Synod documents, a few other textual passages are rather informative when trying to understand how the Church of Sweden conceptualizes reconciliation with the Saami. A symbolically important milestone was reached in 2001 at a church in Undersåker³⁰ when then bishop of the Härnösand diocese, Karl-Johan Tyrberg, acknowledged the Saami perspective as follows:³¹

In relation to the Saami people, the Church has neglected its task of showing *rights, justice, mercy, and charity*³² in a shared responsibility for everyone’s opportunity to work and live. Reconciliation is the expression of love as the strongest power. Without reconciliation, there is no future. As a church, we acknowledge that we are part of the *guilt* that stems from the past. We ask *forgiveness* for what we thought and did [that was] wrong and for what we neglected. The reconciliation we seek is that we can now jointly carry these difficult experiences and move on in mutual love, respect, and trust. (Engvall 2003, p. 9, italics added)

In the speech—considered an official acknowledgment on behalf of the Church (Ekström 2006, p. 160)—justice is tied to the political sphere of human life. More horizons emerged when Tyrberg began discussing reconciliation in relation to love, with love being the greatest power, and acknowledged that what is being asked for is not reconciliation, but forgiveness.

Love, guilt, and forgiveness are not exclusively Christian concepts, but their cluster is not typical of political reconciliation. When institutions acknowledge their corporate responsibility, the term “forgiveness” is rarely part of their vocabulary.³³ In the Christian setting, however, love,

²⁹ Tore Johnsen considers “acknowledging the past” as the first stage in a reconciliation process (Johnsen 2018, p. 102). In this article, I avoid applying step-by-step formulas for reconciliation since, in my view, such formulas simplify the aporic nature of reconciliation and reconciliation processes. Nevertheless, if one were to seek “the first step” in the Church-Saami reconciliation processes, many alternatives emerge other than just acknowledging the past: for example, engaging in grassroot dialogues with the Saami, (reconciliation overtures), structural changes (establishing Saami Church Councils), and examining the history more closely before just offhandedly acknowledging the wrongs of the past.

³⁰ Later similar reconciliation services were held elsewhere in the Luleå diocese and in Göteborg (Tyrberg 2016, p. 58).

³¹ Tyrberg’s acknowledgment was originally in the form of a spoken speech. Although this article focuses on written material, I have included the speech in my analysis since it has been published in the reports by the Church of Sweden.

³² In Swedish: *rätt, rättfärdighet, barmhärtighet och nästankärlek*. The Swedish word “rättfärdighet” can be translated as both “justice” and “righteousness”. In this passage, Tyrberg most likely means “justice”, which he elaborated on in a conference speech a decade later (Tyrberg 2011, p. 52).

³³ The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission employed a vocabulary of forgiveness, which is not typical of political reconciliation processes in general (de Gruchy 2002, pp. 171–80; Nordquist 2017, p. 85; Norheim 2019, p. 107).

guilt, and forgiveness are an intrinsic part of the theology of reconciliation (de Gruchy 2002, p. 93; Norheim 2019, pp. 114–16); but in this case the conceptual parcel does not explicitly intercede with the primary expressions of reconciliation. The Church of Sweden links the Saami reconciliation process with concepts like “rights” and “justice” (Backlund et al. 2000; Ekström 2006, p. 13; Jackelén 2016, p. 12; Jackelén 2017, p. 8), whereas Tyrberg linked it with “mercy” and “charity”, which all refer more to secular and political uses of reconciliation.

3.2.2. Reopening Classical Debates on Relations between Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation

One reason that reconciliation is such an intriguing topic has to do with how it reopens classical ethical debates on who can apologize for whom, since the dead can no longer forgive or reconcile with anyone (de Gruchy 2002, p. 13; Norheim 2019, pp. 117–18). It has been suggested that truth may be the only justice the dead can receive (Schreiter 1998, p. 120). The issue becomes tangible when an institution apologizes for its past injustices. In the case of the Church-Saami reconciliation processes, many of the victims of colonial oppression are still alive, so the reconciling measures have a living audience at whom the Scandinavian churches are directing their efforts.

Hence, the Church of Sweden has taken an approach of being a surrogate acknowledger when acknowledging the past injustices perpetrated against generations who are no longer living. Bård Eirik Hallesby Norheim defines a surrogate apology as a “declaration or statement where leaders of organizations or companies apologize *vicariously*, on behalf of a larger body” (Norheim 2019, p. 107). Unlike Carola Nordbäck and Veli-Pekka Lehtola (Lehtola 2016, p. 1087; Nordbäck 2016, p. 135), I do not consider Tyrberg’s speech or any other statement so far presented by the Church of Sweden to constitute an official apology.³⁴ Therefore, I call the Church’s role that of a surrogate acknowledger.

In 2006, Sören Ekström—the author of the document on Saami questions—³⁵ stated that:

Reconciliation—as noted in Norway—must comprise an acknowledgment of the injustices that have occurred—in principle and in concrete terms—point by point. If those who have committed the abuse cannot admit it themselves—the abuse can be generations back—then somebody must do it in public on their behalf. (Ekström 2006, p. 12)

Under the rubric “On the way to reconciliation?” Ekström points out another, political dimension of the reconciliation process that was initiated and commissioned by the General Synod in 2005 (Rantanen 2005). Namely, the General Synod commissioned the Church Council to attend to the repatriation of Saami skulls that were disinterred in the 19th and 20th centuries for eugenics studies (Church of Sweden General Synod 2005). Since the Church of Sweden assisted in these practices, Ekström suggests building a memorial so as not to forget the oppression of the Saami, with the remains being one of the many expressions of such oppression (Ekström 2006, pp. 106–8).³⁶

The problem with the document on Saami questions is that it portrays the Saami reconciliation process as a symbolic and technical matter, whereas Archbishop Antje Jackelén—like Tyrberg and Hammar—gives reconciliation a human face. Jackelén speaks about the “dark chapter” of Sweden’s history and the Church’s participation in that history. She admits that the Church has been aware of the “colonial oppression” of the Saami, but that the Church (“we”) have been unable to confront

³⁴ The statements or responses (Jokkmokk report, General Synod formulations, Tyrberg’s speech and Jackelén’s forewords) lack many elements vital to public apologies, even though they bear some features that resemble public apologies. According to Gunlög Fur, “when it comes to content, a complete apology must be officially recorded, expressing specifically about the wrongs it apologizes for, takes responsibility for actions in the past, pronounces regret for these acts, and promise not to repeat them” (Fur 2016, p. 176).

³⁵ In 2005, the Church Council (*Kyrkostyrelsen*) decided to conduct an inquiry on Saami matters in the Church of Sweden. The report was published the following year by General Secretary Sören Ekström. In the preface, Ekström wrote that he worked closely with Marie Schött to produce the document. (Ekström 2006, p. 5).

³⁶ On 9 August 2019, the remains of 25 Saami persons were repatriated and reburied in Lycksele (Southern Saami: *Liksjoe*; Ume Saami: *Likssjuo*). In this project and ceremony, Church of Sweden representatives played a significant role (Aurelius 2019; Lindmark 2020).

it. She further states that it hurts to know that the Church has contributed to oppression and in this way caused suffering. “A church that strives to follow Jesus Christ,” she writes, “cannot neglect the wounds” (Jackelén 2016, pp. 11–12). In the foreword of the anthology on historical relations published in 2016, she takes a confessing leader’s role as a surrogate acknowledger when using the language of what “we” have done:

What is done cannot be undone, but it is possible to learn from the mistakes of earlier generations. By highlighting, clarifying, and processing memories, [memories] can take on different roles. Not by forgetting—but by illuminating—can the injustices be processed.—When we have abandoned the Saami, we have also abandoned ourselves and God. We are responsible for our part in the colonialism of Sweden and our difficulties in dealing with it and building new relations in order not to repeat the past wrongs and mistakes. (Jackelén 2016, pp. 11–12)

Jackelén argues that only by dredging up the past injustices is it possible to know what has happened and why. Without this process, making reparations and reconciling relations become impossible. She writes: “We need to build mutual, respectful, and just relations” (Jackelén 2016, p. 11; Jackelén 2017, pp. 7–8). Nevertheless, she does not bind such reconciliation to divine reconciliation (primary level expressions) other than to note that by abandoning the Saami, God is also being abandoned (Jackelén 2016, p. 11; Jackelén 2017, p. 7). This could be interpreted relationally so that horizontal (social) reconciliation is understood to be connected to vertical (divine) reconciliation—the Christian “grand narrative”—but this kind of conclusion would require more content than just one sentence on the matter.

What then can be said about the Church of Sweden’s understanding of reconciliation in relation to the Saami? Theologically, not much can be said if one examines only the written materials. In the recommendations put forward in the Jokkmokk report, the word “reconciliation” does not appear, and in the 172-page document on Saami questions only four pages are dedicated to the theme.³⁷ Overall, both the concept and the idea of reconciliation are explained very little in the Church of Sweden’s official documents on the Saami.³⁸ The same can be said about the concept of “justice”, since it too is not defined or discussed in detail, though the word does pop up in the focal parts of the documents. It is possible that the Church of Sweden does not treat the Saami reconciliation process as a matter concerning the whole church, but more as a regional concern most affecting the Härnösand diocese.³⁹ Somewhat controversially, the Church-Saami dialogues are viewed elsewhere as an ongoing process concerning the whole church (Ekström 2006, p. 124; Jackelén 2016, p. 12). In the following paragraph, I briefly draw conclusions from the Church of Sweden’s sources that further discuss reconciliation with the Saami.

The truth-seeking component of reconciliation plays a vital role in the way the Church of Sweden comprehends reconciliation overall (Church of Sweden Faith Committee Report 2000, sct. 14; Church of Sweden Worship Committee Report 2000, sct. 8; Ekström 2006, pp. 105–6; Jackelén 2016, pp. 11–12; Jackelén 2017, pp. 7–9). The search for truth in the reconciliation process is in the first instance about retrieving what has happened in the conflicted past. The kind of truth that is being sought is a coherence between claims regarding a complex past (Schreiter 1998, pp. 117–18). This has led to the conclusion and a public acknowledgment that the Church took part in the colonial

³⁷ The structure of the document on Saami questions is such that after each practical suggestion, a short reply from the Saami Church Council within the Church of Sweden is given. The section “Toward a Reconciliation?” (*På väg mot en försoning?*) covers two subthemes. First, it equates an understanding of reconciliation with examinations of the past and, second, with the repatriation of the Saami skulls (Ekström 2006, pp. 105–8).

³⁸ Notably, the idea of reconciliation can be explicated without mentioning the word “reconciliation”, and in this study I have included such textual passages in the analysis as well. However, such passages are quite rare.

³⁹ In the document on Saami questions, Ekström mentions that in the symposium organized in 1998, it was noted that the Härnösand diocese has a special responsibility to enhance the Church-Saami reconciliation process (Ekström 2006, p. 59).

practices of Sweden against the Saami. As for justice, it seems that the Church of Sweden is aiming at structural justice, where discriminatory structures are replaced with more just ones (Schreiter 1998, p. 122). Having said that, it seems that the structural goals remain unclear in the written material. Rather, I would describe the Church's approach to justice as "dialogical". By dialogical, I mean that the Church's reconciliation strategy includes exchanges: listening to the Saami, documenting the dialogues, and producing material for future conversations.⁴⁰

Despite some Christian elements, the language and content are secular in the sense that they do not distinctively carry Christian meanings. The expressions are characterized by the secondary level of statements, which means that the claims of reconciliation are such that they do not require a Christian framework, albeit certain references to Christian ethics are made. The theology of reconciliation remains untouched. The remarks on the past and a joint future emphasize reconciliation as an open process, an invitation to a conversation to embrace the other as a response to the historical exclusion of the Saami. By employing a dialogical approach, truth-seeking, public acknowledgment, and the recognition of Saami identity, the Church is renegotiating relations in order to reshape its moral order. Nevertheless—and despite the numerous documents—the Church of Sweden has not as an institution engaged in independent theological reflection on reconciliation with the Saami.

3.3. Structuring Justice: The Church of Norway

3.3.1. Affirming Cultural Diversity through the Bible

As for the Church of Norway, its starting point in conducting both the Church-Saami reconciliation process and the way it conceptualizes reconciliation differ from the neighboring Church of Sweden. Namely, the Church of Norway has undertaken a reconciliation process among indigenous peoples both internationally⁴¹ and locally⁴² (Church of Norway 2019, p. 6). The Church states that its contacts with indigenous peoples globally have given an "important impetus" for developing a Saami-based theology (Church of Norway 2019, p. 46). The international experience becomes evident when scrutinizing documents in which the Church of Norway voices its reconciliation efforts concerning the Saami. Moreover, the voices are less scattered when the General Synod articulates its reasoning for seeking reconciliation and the strategy plans, without the names of specific authors being presented.⁴³ Hence, the Church of Norway's own uniform voice in this regard becomes clear: the Church of Norway aims to speak of reconciliation as an institution instead of a collection of individual voices.

The Church of Norway's approach to reconciliation utilizes Christian sources, especially the Bible, when shaping its renewed agenda with the Saami. The theological crux of the argumentation for reconciliation goes as follows: (1) since all human beings are created in the image of God, every person is equally valuable and discrimination has no theological grounds, which leads to the affirmation that indigenous peoples have suffered from violations of discrimination; (2) through incarnation

⁴⁰ This type of justice—as compassionate as it appears—may misdirect attention away from structures that would require attention unless structural changes were done in parallel. The Church of Sweden has engaged in structural changes to improve Saami church life and relations. Due to the narrow approach used in this research, however, the meanings of the structural changes with respect to reconciliation are not explained in the textual material (other than repatriation of the Saami skulls and the truth-seeking component). That is why it is difficult on a conceptual level to call the Church's understanding of justice "structural justice".

⁴¹ Norwegian Church Aid (NCA) has supported the indigenous San people in the Kalahari region of southern Africa. The San people won a court case in 2006 with the help of NCA to live in their traditional area of the Central Kalahari Game Reserve (Church of Norway 2011, pp. 78–80).

⁴² Interestingly, the Church of Norway has carried out a local reconciliation and dialogue project in the Lule Saami area of North Salten (Hamarøy and Tysfjord 2005–2007). The first strategy plan states that the "project has provided the Church of Norway with valuable experiences that can be passed on to local and regional efforts at Sami-Norwegian reconciliation in other parts of the country," and the project has been "the most concrete result" of the General Synod resolution of 1997 (KM 13/97) regarding reconciliation and dialogue (Church of Norway 2011, pp. 12, 26, 66–67).

⁴³ The foreword to the first *Strategic plan for Sami church life in the Church of Norway* was written by Jens-Petter Johnsen, director of the Church Council of the Church of Norway (Church of Norway 2011, p. 3).

God has sent Jesus Christ to reconcile the whole of creation, which addresses the significance of the worldly reality and its distinctive Christian worship expressions; (3) therefore, the Church must embrace cultural diversity and at the same time fight against the unjust political reality; (4) the Church should fight against injustices guided by the prophetic traditions of the Old and New Testaments, including Jesus's examples of giving a voice to the oppressed and Paul's conviction to dismantle the social wall between the Jewish Christians and the non-Jewish Christians. The Church further argues: "The Bible paints a picture of a God who is especially concerned with those who are oppressed and vulnerable. This motivates the church in its commitment in social issues" (Church of Norway 2011, pp. 38–39; Church of Norway 2019, pp. 7–9). With this logic, the Church of Norway binds together both the primary and secondary level of expressions on reconciliation. As a result, the nexus between the two levels is occurring through *creation theology*: since God created humans and the whole of creation, earthly injustices towards humans and creation cannot be ignored by a Christian church (Church of Norway 2019, pp. 6–9).

When positioning the Saami and their cultures in the Christian context, the argumentation follows biblical explanations: "The Great Commission 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations' (Matthew 28:19) shows that the gospel is given to all peoples, and that all peoples therefore have the right to a place in the church" (Church of Norway 2011, p. 38; Church of Norway 2019, p. 8). This leads to a conclusion by the Church of Norway that all native languages are part of the identity of the Church and the Holy Spirit, following a postcolonial interpretation of a relationship between Genesis 11 and Acts 2.⁴⁴ In Genesis 11, the linguistic confusion at Babel occurs, whereas an account of the Pentecost (Acts 2) functions as a "counternarrative" to reverse the events that took place at Babel, when people from every nation could hear God in their own language, and "Pentecost is therefore the Holy Spirit's affirmation of native languages". Also, the last book of the Bible, Revelation, is referred to when emphasizing the significance of native languages in the heavenly liturgy that peoples from all nations participate in using their own languages (Revelation 7:9). Hence, the Church of Norway states that the linguistic diversity of Christian churches is a characteristic that is often missed and adds that "the Bible, hymns, and liturgies in the vernacular are an important part of the Lutheran heritage," forming a confessional basis to which the Church of Norway is committed (Church of Norway 2011, pp. 22, 37–38, Church of Norway 2019, p. 8).

The Church of Norway is outspoken in its protection of the cultural diversity of the Saami and elaborates on an idea of genuine diversity with two key concepts: through inclusion and reconciliation (Church of Norway 2011, p. 31). "Inclusion is the basic principle in the policy for minorities that governs the Church of Norway's approach to Sami church life", whereas "reconciliation must be understood as the basic approach to the actions urged in the plan" (Church of Norway 2011, p. 9). The historical background for highlighting the two approaches is then explained: the Norwegianization of the Saami represented a form of integration policy in which "homogeneity and similarity" were "the norm for a community", which resulted in a "low tolerance of differences and diversity". Inclusion, in contrast, begins from the opposite perspective, acknowledging "differences and diversity as the norm for a community". The Saami are therefore given the possibility to participate in the life of the Church without having to relinquish their distinctive characteristics or differences. "Sami church life must be *included*, that is to say, given room to exist with its distinctiveness as a necessary and equal part of the [C]hurch of Norway" (Church of Norway 2011, pp. 35–36). Also, the Church warns against a false sense of inclusion, according to which indigenous peoples or other minorities are expected

⁴⁴ For instance, for Miroslav Volf the story of the Pentecost is primarily about God's justice, which protects cultural diversity from the monocultural enterprise in the Babel narrative. The initiative of building a tower towards heaven is a colonial project by nature, one which God resisted by scattering the languages. During Pentecost, the reverse happens when the Holy Spirit pours energies into the margins so that peoples can speak the prophesy using their own languages. This—according to Volf—is not a story about the emergence of a metalanguage that everybody can understand, but instead comprises an important aspect of God's justice, in which the oppressed gain a voice and agency (Volf 1996, pp. 193–232).

to enrich the majority without the majority needing to change its attitudes (Church of Norway 2019, p. 10).

The Church also warns against false reconciliation in the form of special “services of reconciliation”, thinking that reconciliation in that way has been taken care of, only for it to constitute a “superficial” reconciliation (Church of Norway 2011, p. 66). In the literature, “cheap reconciliation” is referred to as a failure to “address systemic issues of injustice” (Shore 2009, p. 135). The Church of Norway is clearly aware of the risk by treating reconciliation comprehensively as the basic approach to the Saami people in general (Church of Norway 2011, p. 36; Church of Norway 2019, p. 10):

The Church of Norway’s concern for dialogue and reconciliation cannot be reduced to isolated events, but must be seen as a comprehensive approach in which dialogue and reconciliation are applied to all aspects of the Church of Norway’s consideration of issues related to the Sami people. (Church of Norway 2011, p. 37)

3.3.2. The Old Injustices as a Fresh Context for Revising Church Identity

The Church of Norway considers reconciliation an ongoing process where justice plays a vital role when ideals of reconciliation meet with practical reality and structures. This means that the concern for justice and reconciliation must eventually require sufficient resources and revised structures on a long-term basis in order to rectify injustices against the Saami (Church of Norway 2006; Church of Norway 2011, p. 37):

The *Strategic plan for Sami church life in the Church of Norway* takes therefore a *structural approach* to the church’s concern for dialogue and reconciliation, where the most important point is [to] create settings, relations and structures which can have a reconciling effect and can encourage equality in the church. Norwegianisation has made the Sami people invisible, and this will continue unless efforts are made to change the structures that caused it. To face this challenge, all parties must be aware of the historical background and must want to establish new structures that will secure a new future together. The Church of Norway has taken important steps in this direction, and it is expected that the process will continue. (Church of Norway 2011, p. 37)

In following this plan, the Church of Norway aims to reform the Church structures by applying its understanding of *structural justice* to address the social identities that contributed to division and exclusion. Structural justice—in the process of reconciliation—dismantles the social structures that created injustice and seeks to replace them with more just structures (Schreiter 2008, pp. 639–40). As a result, structural justice can be seen as a form of *restitutional justice*, which targets structures that initially caused a conflict and change them in an effort to rehumanize the dignity of the oppressed (Kuokkanen 2020; Schreiter 1998, pp. 121–23). John W. de Gruchy—who was engaged in the struggle against the apartheid regime in South Africa—argues that restoring justice in the context of reconciliation in the end comes down to a focus on social and economic justice (de Gruchy 2002, p. 205). As for the Church of Norway, it can be argued that in structuring justice it inevitably structures reconciliation, too, when it highlights the need for resources and the renewal of social structures in an effort to include Saaminess as a “viable and equal”⁴⁵ part of the Church. Instead of merely repeating the message of reconciliation, the Church of Norway explicates the “social meaning of reconciliation”, which means that it is seeking both practical and theological meanings for reconciliation in the Christian context (Volf 1998).

The Church of Norway is also focusing on the connection between reconciliation and truth-telling. While not indulging overly much in the truth-telling part, in 1997 it stated briefly: “The General Synod

⁴⁵ The Church of Norway’s first slogan for a renewed vision of Saami church life is “Dynamic and coequal—Sami church life in the Church of Norway,” and the following slogan is “Saami church life—viable and equal” (Church of Norway 2011, p. 7; Church of Norway 2019, pp. 4–5; see also Church of Norway 1990, 113).

acknowledges that the authorities' Norwegianization policy and the Church of Norway's role in it have led to injustice towards the Saami people. The General Synod will contribute to the cessation of this injustice" (Church of Norway 1997). The acknowledgment was repeated in 2003 when the Church of Norway took a stance on defending the Saami's right to use land in Finnmark, in the so-called Finnmark act:

The work for new legislation concerning Finnmark is an opportunity to redress old injustices. The Church of Norway also acknowledges that it has helped to suppress the rights and culture of the Saami people. Rights and justice are the basis for reconciliation. Reconciliation presupposes openness to experienced injustice on all sides and a desire for change. The Church wants to contribute to these processes. (Church of Norway 2003)

These words and the above-mentioned textual passages represent a public acknowledgement on behalf of the Church of Norway. The historical wrongs done to the Saami are identified, but the truth-telling emphasis does not comprise a dominating strain in the argument. It is as if the Church of Norway has moved on as an institution to examine both the practical and theological implications of reconciliation to the extent of developing contextual Saami theology⁴⁶ and strengthening Christian Saami traditions within the Church (Church of Norway 2006; Church of Norway 2011, pp. 30, 56–69, 81; Church of Norway 2019, pp. 15, 22, 31–32). In other words, the Church of Norway has shifted the negative and awkward starting point away from the Christian Church's collusion in the colonial oppression of marginalized peoples towards making a contribution to social reconciliation, which has not often been a strength of Christian churches (Baum 1997, p. 186; Tombs 2017, pp. 123–26, 138–42; Wells 1997, pp. 2, 6).⁴⁷ With respect to the Saami, the Church of Norway utilizes social reconciliation as a fresh context to contest its own ecclesiology and identity in a way that the doctrine of reconciliation eventually reflects the doctrine of the Church (Mostert 2010, p. 205).

4. Conclusions

In this article, I have analyzed the nature of reconciliation first in the Church of Sweden and then in the Church of Norway regarding church-Saami reconciliation processes during the years 1990–2020. From the Christian standpoint, ecclesiastical processes whereby the churches sort out the wrongs done to indigenous people are based on an underlying tension. The tension is historically created by conflicting roles in which the churches act on the one hand as a community or an intermediary facilitating reconciliation and yet on the other hand have contributed to colonial oppression in the past. This tension between past and present has elicited a political need for institutional reconciliation. Given the richness and complexity of the biblical notion of reconciliation, I have analyzed the theological argumentations that the Church of Sweden and the Church of Norway use when reconciling with the Saami. It is a particularly relevant question since one could assume that Christian churches utilize their own resources in order to offer something insightful and distinctive to public dialogues on reconciliation (Tombs 2017, p. 145). Since both the Church of Sweden and the Church of Norway link reconciliation to the concept of justice, I have also analyzed justice as it is understood in the Church-Saami reconciliation documents.

⁴⁶ The Church of Norway defines Saami theology as an emerging "form of contextual theological reflection based on Sami perceptions of Christianity and existence and relevant themes from Sami history, culture, and community life" (Church of Norway 2011, pp. 22, 29, 75–76; Church of Norway 2019, pp. 20–23).

⁴⁷ According to David Tombs, the doctrinal and sacramental emphasis on atonement has limited horizons with respect to the political and social context when Christian churches have understood reconciliation as a spiritually inward and private engagement. This emphasis has led to a gap between thinking of atonement with God and thinking of reconciliation between people. This historical disconnection has made it challenging for churches to offer insightful contributions to social reconciliation discussions. Tombs refers to it as a paradox: despite the extensive attention paid to reconciliation in Christian theology, social reconciliation had not received much attention from Christian churches and Christian figures prior to the 1990s (Tombs 2017, pp. 123–26, 138–42).

According to my analysis, the theological strategies between the two Nordic churches differ greatly in terms of how they explicate reconciliation in the Saami context. The Church of Sweden is driven by a truth-telling emphasis and is somewhat unable to bind social reconciliation to the doctrine of reconciliation. This leads to the conclusion that its reflection on reconciliation is characterized by a secular usage of the term reconciliation. Theological resources refer to Christian social ethics rather than to the primary level of expressions of a God-given reality. Also, it is not clear how to make sense of the Church of Sweden's ecclesiastical voice on the matter: Is the Church of Sweden as an institution remaining silent on the matter, and is the reconciliation process being initiated and carried out instead by individual church leaders who find the issue topical? Either way, the Church of Sweden has elaborated on the concept and meaning of reconciliation very little, and when it does mention reconciliation it does so in order to reconstruct its own memory and renegotiate relations with the Saami from its own perspective. Consequently, I have described the Church's approach to justice as dialogical, which means that the Church approaches reconciliation as an invitation for further conversations. Despite this fact, the Church of Sweden has not been able to offer any independent theological reflection on reconciliation with the Saami. This evokes a critical question regarding the Christian contribution of the Church of Sweden to social reconciliation, and particularly to institutional reconciliation.

The Church of Norway provides theological aspirations for why reconciliation with the Saami is needed: Since God has created humans and the whole of creation, any violations committed against humans and creation cannot be tolerated, and that is why the Church cannot stay silent in the face of human-rights abuses. Unlike the Church of Sweden, the Church of Norway utilizes Christian sources and binds together both vertical (divine) and horizontal (social) reconciliation arguments, and the nexus between the two is built through creation theology. This means that the understanding comprises both primary and secondary statements on reconciliation. Overall, reconciliation forms an integral part of the Church's policy towards Saami church life. The Church approaches reconciliation comprehensively and structurally so that on a practical level, reconciliation ultimately means a commitment to material resources and a readiness to revise structures, both of which bind reconciliation to structural justice. The truth-telling aspect does not dominate the Church's reconciliation narrative. The Church of Norway takes seriously its ecclesiastical challenge to contribute to the field of social reconciliation and treats it as a fresh context to revise its ecclesiology, its identity.

Despite the many similarities both churches share with each other regarding the Church-Saami reconciliation process (public acknowledgement, truth-telling, the Saami Church Councils), in the final analysis their *understanding* of reconciliation in the Saami context follows two differing paths. As for the Church of Sweden, the path points at the politics of reconciliation, while for the Church of Norway it adheres to the theology of reconciliation.⁴⁸

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