

Finno-Ugric Forest Theology and Liturgy

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I would like to begin by introducing some of my main points that I am going to elaborate:

- * we need theology and liturgy that is *sensitive to its context*
- * our common context as humanity is coloured by a deep crisis that is *ecological* and *spiritual*

Yet there are powerful streams, deep currents that can carry us to a better future if we choose so. I refer to

* the *Christian wisdom tradition*, the contemplative tradition. It includes deep meditation or prayer that helps us to integrate our minds, meet the unknown in the depth of our minds, in nature and in God's mysterious reality. Contemplative tradition offers tools to meet the roots of many present problems.

* I see hope in the wisdom of world's *indigenous cultures* that are based on different world views, different from our dominant Western worldview that is mechanistic and fragmenting.

Our closest indigenous dialogue partners are of course the Sami and I am glad that tomorrow we shall hear more about their views on liturgy. I concentrate on my own *Finnish culture* which also offers some alternative ways to perceive the world. Finns are not an indigenous people but we are a subarctic forest people. Our language, as you know, belongs to the Finno-Ugric language group, together with for example the Sami languages, Estonian and Hungarian.

Finnishness is a mixture of very old, Finno-Ugric cultural elements and Indo-European elements. When I search the oldest, Finno-Ugric features, I do not do it in a nationalistic sense – there is no "pure, golden Finno-Ugric past". On the contrary, my quest is for an integrated, healed culture that can lead in the present context to greater hospitality and openness to ever new, dynamic mixtures.

Moreover, I have an intuition that a major transformation in our dominant worldview can open ways to emphasise Christian spirituality, its depth dimension so that we can make Christianity understandable again in the secularised West.

As a Lutheran I have hopes that this kind of transformation can enliven our Lutheran prayer life and liturgy. One of the urgent tasks is to bring love for nature to the center of spirituality and make Christians important partners in the work of healing the shattered ecological balance.

Context

What is our present context like?

As humanity we face an unheard of *ecological crisis*. The latest news that shocked me were that there are 58 % less vertebrate animals in the world than in 1970. They have disappeared because their habitats are destroyed. The oceans are seriously overfished, too many forests cut. In Finland the highly technological forestry has led to an alarming extinction rate of animals and plants but the business goes on as usual, if not is intensified.

Also globally the extinction rate is terrifying. We know the seriousness of climate change. Behind these problems lures overconsumption – this is how the ecological crisis is fundamentally a *spiritual* one: people crave for more and more security, comfort and things.

The spiritual and social crisis is visible in many parts of the world. I am thinking for example about the American presidential elections. There is a growing lack of empathy in this world where hunger, violence and wars are harsh reality for millions.

Fast *technologisation* is aggravating all these problems. True, technology has its positive sides and some wise technology is needed as part of the solutions. But the present race towards more and more digitalisation and robotisation works against the solutions if people increasingly use machines. The way internet works can have permanent effects on how the brain functions.

Recent scholarships shows, alarmingly, how digitalisation brings along shallowness of thinking and difficulties to concentrate on tasks that require deep reading or take time. For example, I hear Finnish teachers tell how school children are more restless than earlier.

For me it is a spiritual challenge to try to understand these currents and evaluate them. Maybe it is one dimension of spiritual watchfulness? If the dominant current takes people towards shallow thinking, should Christians offer to the world the depth dimension of spirituality?

More specifically, my *Finnish context* is, as I said, a mixture. This mixture of Finno-Ugric and Indo-European ingredients could be a dynamic one but unfortunately this is not always the case. The oldest, Finno-Ugric wisdom has for a long time been marginalised and Finns are made to see it as old-fashioned or shameful.

Personally I think that I have two amazingly deep sources of transformative power if I am able to live in contact with them:

- * Christian tradition of deep prayer and the integral mind and
- * my oldest cultural layers and their worldview.

What is the Finno-Ugric worldview like?

Otaniemi Chapel and two mental models

Please think about this Otaniemi chapel.

I follow two Finnish philosophers who have analysed this chapel. As a tool they use the research of a Norwegian linguist called Frode Strømnes. With the philosophers I interpret this space as bringing two different mental models or worldviews together: Finno-Ugric and Indo-European. The models dialogue with each other but not merge. Can they coexist in harmony?

Which elements represent the Indo-European mental model? *Linearity*, straight lines, in the architecture, in furniture and in the cross are characteristic to it. (The cross was a *Roman* execution

devise.) *Rectangularity* is a human shape, in this sense the cross is human-centered. The cross gives the forest view a focus.

What about the Finno-Ugric architectural features? The philosophers call this chapel "a wooden cave". There is not much movement in the architecture, it is rather *static* and meditative. The space is arranged *non-hierarchically*, for example the pulpit is not high above. The altar view with the forest is *non-linear* and it connects us to the *cyclical time* of forest and seasons. Maybe this space represents a static dialogue of the inner space and the forest.

Two mental models come together, they meet but is there something disturbing in the way they coexist? This is what the philosophers ask but do not really answer. I think that both mental models have valuable elements. I also ask what kind of coexistence could serve best the task of contextualising Christianity in Finnishness?

Enonkoski Lutheran Convent

Please compare this image with this Otaniemi cross.

This is the altar from Enonkoski Lutheran Convent, in Eastern Finland. It is a retreat place, in an old school building. The cross is made from a real trunk of a tree. Its shapes are all organic. Someone said to me that she sees in this image vulnerability. Maybe this cross is an image of suffering, not only of Christ but also of humans and the forest?

Now I would like to offer a glimpse of neurosciences where there is emerging new kind of discussion about the functions of our brain. Our brain is not symmetrical, the left and right brain hemispheres both deal with any kind of issues, but there are significant differences in *how* they function.

Iain McGilchrist is a British psychiatrist, neuroscientist and philosopher who tries to understand the development of Western culture with the help of the newest knowledge about our brain. He leaves behind the populist assumptions about the left and the right hemisphere but nevertheless finds important points that have to do with the asymmetry.

Our left brain hemisphere is the one that prefers clear categories and interprets words literally. It is very fond of words and likes to build linear systems. It is optimistic about its abilities.

Our right brain hemisphere perceives things as a whole, seeking knowledge also in feelings and intuitions. It is characterised by empathy and by the sense of depth. Right hemisphere has sensitivity to context. It works cyclically. It appreciates paradoxical and metaphorical language. Because of these qualities McGilchrist calls it the wiser hemisphere.

Our brain hemispheres are meant to cooperate – but the wiser right one that has the holistic view should be the leader and the left one's ideal role were that of a competent and dynamic servant. McGilchrist's main point is that in the Western world the left hemisphere has began to dominate in a way that has with time become dangerous to our survival.

So what is urgently needed is a rebalancing of our cultures, giving more space to the elements of the right brain hemisphere, for example through art and spirituality. I suggest that we seek to transform our dominant worldview, not jumping to something totally unknown but looking at the still living peoples that have a more balanced worldview. I am talking about the indigenous peoples, and as a Finn, I urge my people to get to know our own deep treasures.

Shortly, I would describe Finno-Ugric world view as emphasising:

- * balance, not limitless growth
- * non-hierarchical relationships
- * cyclical time
- * organic shapes, circular shapes
- * moderation – not taking more from nature than you need
- * porous, permeable limits, no strict categories or definitions
- * avoiding conflict
- * static, to the point of closedness or difficulty to communicate; melancholy

I see in many of these emphases potential to balance the Western way of life and understanding of Christianity.

Paateri Forest Church

In my quest for a contextualised Finnish Christianity I have called my initial attempts Forest Theology. I try to find a balance between different worldviews, a balance that can help to restore the human mind and nature around us.

In order to live in contact with the Finno-Ugric dimension of our culture I have made some personal choices. I have chosen to live in Eastern Finland, where a bit more of the old culture is alive. It is also the poorest part of Finland. I live near big forests and lakes, in daily contact with them.

Our summer cottage is at the shore of a big wilderness lake called Pielinen and this chapel is located very near. This chapel is designed by an artist called Eva Rynänen (1915-2001) and it is located at her home, Paateri, in Lieksa. Have a look at it while I tell you something about my Forest Theology:

Forest Theology means that human beings search a new place in the cosmos.

The present age has given us food, clothes, and security. But it has forgotten the soul. It has forgotten the relationship with nature. This way everything has become threatened.

Contact with the forest heals the soul of a Finn. Connection to nature must be placed back to the center of our world view.

God heals. The healing power of Christianity must be rediscovered. We must painfully find words to speak about God in the midst of an ecological disaster and a cultural loss of soul. But first comes silence, words follow. This silence is the silence of contemplation and action.

Let Finnish theology be Forest Theology. Forest has always been for Finns the most important cradle of meanings and it has given the symbols to understand our lives. Forest time is different. It heals. God heals in the forest.

Forest Theology grows from the old Finnish knowledge of the wilderness. It also has its roots in the different wilderness of the Biblical world. It approaches the Bible through Jesus the Wisdom teacher who regularly stayed in prayer in the wilderness.

We do not talk here about the merging of two religions. We are taking the old Finnish cosmology seriously, appreciating its balanced wisdom about how to be with nature. Through these eyes we approach the Christian wisdom tradition. This deep dimension of faith is capable of adding more grace and joy to Finnishness.

Forest Liturgy is about reorienting ourselves anew in the cosmos. Liturgy is like the Milky Way that we call Linnunrata, the way of the birds. It is like a huge Tree of life, having its roots deep in God's waters.

Without the forest, we get lost.

My book *Metsän teologia* (2013) has three parts:

1) *history of ideas*, an analyse of the old Finnish nature relationship and a serious alienation from nature. This alienation is a long process that has to do with the arrivals of Christianity and the Enlightenment, but also more recently with urbanisation and the emergence of virtual reality. All these have of course their positive sides, but seen from the perspective of nature relationship they have caused a deep wound.

2) *philosophical construction* where I analyse the elements like non-hierarchical relationships, concept of space and time etc. This is strongly a construction because the strings that still connect modern Finnish culture to the oldest layers are very thin. Something is to be found in our sauna culture – which is by no means the treasure of Finns only, but here it has preserved something of an ancient sense of the sacredness of sauna bathing.

More importantly, the Finnish language delivers us something very old, for example in the fact that our language is synthetic, inclined to integrate elements into one totality (= long words). It does not have grammatical gender, which actually makes Finnish a wonderful theological and liturgical language. You don't need to choose between gendered pronouns when speaking about God because there is only one pronoun *hän*.

3) *theological implications*:

* about God: Forest Theology emphasises panentheism, thus balancing (but not denying) more personal images of God. Even Luther had panentheistic views: "God is present in every tiny leaf of a tree." God is present in low places, kenotically.

* A trinitarian balance is needed, at the same time as Christ is theologically central as teacher of transformative prayer and as (cosmic) saviour. (See the gentle images of Christ in Paateri church.)

* integral salvation: according to the Gospels salvation is supposed to be reality also in this life, first in God-human relationship but at the same time in relationships with oneself, one's body, one's closest communities, and in society. Also the cosmic/ecological dimension of salvation is crucial.

* concept of church: a fireplace at crossroads (see the theology of Anna-Maija Raittila) – a nonhierarchical image of a circle, an image with welcoming warmth.

In Forest Theology I seek tools for transformation through the traditional way of integrating contemplation and asceticism (or in today's language maybe activism). Contemplation is in my

context both nature contemplation and coming together as Christian community to celebrate the Eucharist. Asceticism means especially a way of life based on moderation and justice.

Now I am working with the same issues, seeking a deeper understanding of the possibilities of contemplative prayer in today's world. I use the image of deep water, referring to the sources of desert fathers and mothers, but also those of the human mind, its deep and powerful unconscious mysteries. There is also high-quality knowledge to be attained through physical work in nature by picking berries, fishing etc. - by living in contact with nature and its cycles.

It is time for less words, less theo-logy. I long for more silence and the language of silence: symbols and rites, and action.

Contemplativeness requires some distance from technology with its tendency to make thinking shallow and fast. One can use technology but better choose critically. Personally, I hardly use the social media. I need to guard my time and privacy and take care of the depth dimension in every area of my life.

Liturgy means for me using the language of silence, of metaphors, the language of forests and lakes. It strengthens the depth dimension of life. It reorients me to the integral salvation of God.

Puijo Forest Service

Taking liturgy to nature, celebrating under God's sky is a long tradition here. Services have been held in forest, on lakeshore, seashore, or fjells. In today's Finland, I interpret that people come to these services because of a longing for the sense of integration of their life. They search the same God in nature and in the Christian liturgy and sacraments.

Forest services concretise an ancient sense of the sacredness of nature, in a panentheistic way.

Forest services are for many easier to attend than entering a church, for many reasons. Different kinds of people come, regularly, to outdoor services.

These services are often celebrated with the same, familiar liturgy that is used inside the churches. This is fine, it may give the sense of integration. Also sometimes more meditative services are organised, possibly reflecting a bit more strongly some Finno-Ugric elements.

Last August I was asked to join a forest service in Kuopio, on the top of the Puijo hill. This was a meditative gathering with simple liturgical parts, many of them in the form of well-known songs or hymns. No Eucharist this time. There were musicians to support the singing and many other groups had prepared the event by making coffee etc.

My sermon themes rose from Creation Sunday and church year (gratitude). I used some meditative elements, summoning us to keep a moment of silence together, contemplating the beloved lake Kallavesi.

This kind of services can be celebrated at any time of the year. They can also have more political elements attached, in the spirit of *contemplation in action*. As an example I can mention a forest prayer in my own congregation during a struggle about a possible uranium mine. We who opposed

the idea of uranium mining organised a prayer service sitting in the forest near the site where nature was threatened.

Juurimessu - Root mass

God metaphors in a hymn made for the Root mass:

Creator of Roots: God of roots, of moss, of hay, of buds/ of streams, of rapids, of waves, of winds, of skies, of stars,/ I contemplate you, I drink from you, I breathe you, / Creator of everything

Or: Christ of the poor and the desolated, of those who sleep outdoors, Broken Christ, Christ of Tenderness, have mercy on us. (see <https://juurimessu.wordpress.com>)

The Root mass is a small beginning, an approach to contextualise Finnish liturgy. There are these two big elements, shown in the songs:

- * contemplation of nature, love of nature
- * action for the suffering nature and fellow humans.

We are a group of Finnish theologians and a musician, trying to express something recognisable in this culture and language, in this time when nature is suffering and people are migrating here. Elements of each season and each place where the mass is celebrated are encouraged.

We search a continuum with the old rune singing that was despised by Christianity – now we are reintroducing it liturgically with the new songs. The liturgy is simple, no new melodies but spoken dialogue. Nevertheless, new images from nature are used, but respecting the wisdom of liturgical tradition, maintaining its basic structure and elements.

Here are some of our interpretations of it:

- * in the beginning: original blessing, joy, gratitude
- * confession of sins comes after sermon, before the Eucharist
- * confession of faith as a pilgrimage, walking through the artistic altars containing parts the of Apostolic confession
- * collection: take a piece of paper with a question in it: *What is it that you most enjoy to do? What is it that you feel you are good at? Could God use you through that in the world?* (+ possibility to give money to the poorest in the world - later, when going out)
- * a child assisting with the Eucharist, carrying the bread that is self-baked, soft

Liturgy is meditative but difficult current issues are dealt with in the sermon and intercessions. This is an attempt to keep together contemplation and action as radical love in one's everyday life.

The Root mass has so far been celebrated three times during the last year, all of them in urban communities. The organising requires a lot of work but the feedback has been very positive. After the last mass a woman told me that she feels it is important that our own culture is finally valued. For a man the words didn't feel so much modernised but "different", giving a sense of liturgy. Another woman had been dreaming of doing something like this expressing her feminism and bodiliness – Root mass had the language and structure she had been intuiting. Several people wanted to tell about their special trees and nature experiences, also in the cities.

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I leave to you a big question to think about: what could this sort of contextualising and contemplativeness give our Lutheran tradition, its spirituality, liturgy and theology?

What could a more balanced Lutheranism look like in your context? One that appreciates both brain hemispheres and the depth dimension? That uses less words and more the language of silence?

Some concluding points

* There are powerful, deep sources available in the Christian tradition. The wisdom dimension helps to find the transformative power of an integral mind. This depth dimension of the Spirit is necessary in today's world that is longing for an integral salvation.

* A transition of world views is needed and there are other wisdom traditions in the world that can help us in this. A direct, physical contact with nature and its cycles is vital.

* A more holistic world view could make Christianity more understandable, as a faith that is approached through spirituality and that leads to radical action of love.

Literature:

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