Debating the Norwegian Mission to the Homeless

Kristian Bredesen's *Taterblod* in Historical Context

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Abstract: Established in 1897, the Norwegian Mission to the Homeless (Norsk Misjon blant Hjemløse) was for nearly a century a domestic Christian endeavour conducted in tandem with social welfare agencies in Norway to reach and assimilate members of the itinerant *tater* or *Romani* ethnic group, which they perceived as rife with social problems. However, its methods of social control, which included the forced placement of the offspring of *tatere* in children's homes, involuntary sterilisation, and in some cases lobotomies, eventually became the targets of strident criticism. The present article views this domestic mission primarily through the lens of a member of a *tater* family, Kristian Bredesen, who with his brother was removed from their parents' custody in the 1920s, placed into a children's home, and eventually became a teacher and superintendent of schools. His novel *Taterblod*, which to a great degree is a fictionalised account of his family of origin, does not paper over the dark side of the mission's policies, but his criticism of this is tempered by his argument that for all its faults Norwegian Mission to the Homeless merits acknowledgment for rescuing many children from dire social circumstances in dysfunctional families that in many cases were involved in chronic criminal activities and suffering from the consequences of alcoholism.

Keywords: Kristian Bredesen, *Taterblod*, Norsk Misjon blant Hjemløse, missions in fiction, sterilisation, ethnic minorities, Ingvald B. Carlsen, Gunnar Stålsett.

Sammendrag: Etablert i 1897, var Norsk misjon blant hjemløse i nesten et århundre en innenlandsk kristen innsats utført i samarbeid med sosiale velferdsorganisasjoner i Norge for å nå og assimilere medlemmer av den omreisende tater- eller romanifolkegruppen, som de oppfattet som preget av sosiale problemer. Imidlertid ble metodene for sosial kontroll, som inkluderte tvangsplassering av taterbarn i barnehjem, tvangssterilisering og i noen tilfeller lobotomier, etter hvert mål for sterk kritikk. Denne artikkelen ser på denne innenlandske misjonen hovedsakelig gjennom perspektivet til et medlem av en taterfamilie, Kristian Bredesen, som sammen med sin bror ble fjernet fra foreldrenes omsorg på 1920-tallet, plassert i et barnehjem og til slutt ble lærer og skolesjef. Hans roman *Taterblod*, som i stor grad er en fiksjonalisert beretning om hans familie eller opprinnelse, skjuler ikke de mørke sidene ved misjonens politikk, men hans kritikk av dette er dempet av hans argument om at til tross for alle feilene fortjener Norsk misjon blant hjemløse anerkjennelse for å ha reddet mange barn fra alvorlige sosiale forhold i dysfunksjonelle familier som i mange tilfeller var involvert i kronisk kriminalitet og led av konsekvensene av alkoholisme.

Nøkkelord: Kristian Bredesen, Taterblod, Norsk misjon blant hjemløse, misjon i fiksjon, sterilisering, etniske minoriteter, Ingvald B. Carlsen, Gunnar Stålsett.

Introduction[1]

With an appreciable measure of justification, Christian missionary endeavours across ethnic lines have long been subjected to criticism as either conscious or unwitting agents of colonialism, cultural imperialism, and other offences. As one complex dimension of this, missionaries – however well-intended – have also been accused of violating the fundamental human rights of the people whom they were evangelising or otherwise seeking to serve with the Gospel. From the Spanish Franciscans who established a chain of missions in Alta California to the missionaries of various denominations who sacrificed their ethical principles on the altar of apartheid and its segregationist antecedents in South Africa, their alleged misdeeds have been the subjects of an extensive body of scholarly analysis, imaginative literature, political propaganda, portrayal on the silver screen, and other channels of often vitriolic condemnation. Such criticism of missions as well as occasional praise in literature for the propagation of Christianity and other forms of Christian ministry across cultural lines have been subjected to a considerable amount of scholarly analysis in recent decades. Jamie S. Scott's survey articles in the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, "Missions and Fiction" and "Missions and Film", are invaluable points of departure for explorations within

1 Much of the research for and writing of this article was done during my stint as a Visiting Scholar at Fjellhaug International University College in Oslo in 2023. I wish to acknowledge the indispensable assistance received from its library staff in locating essential source materials.

these far-ranging topics.[2] Thus far, the lion's share of representation of controversial missionary endeavours has dealt with foreign missionary fields. However, there have also been frequent criticism of cross-cultural *domestic* missions, such as compulsory assimilation of Native American children at mission-run boarding schools.

In Scandinavian literature, disputes concerning allegedly abusive missionary activity and missionaries' disrespectful attitudes towards minority ethnic groups and their cultures have not been a particularly frequent theme. One conspicuous exception is found in the quasi-autobiographical novels of Kristian Bredesen (1923-2015), a Norwegian-born son of so-called *tatere*, or migratory *Romani* people who have sailed the coastal waters of southern and western Norway since the sixteenth century. His debut work *Tatersønn* was published in 1995 when he was seventy-two years old and retired from his position as superintendent of schools at Bømlo in Sunnhordland;[3] *Taterblod* followed seven years later. As will be seen in the present article, the collaboration of the Norsk Misjon blant Hjemløse (hereinafter sometimes abbreviated as "the Mission", as it was often summarily called "Misjonen" during its years of activity and occasionally retrospectively after its dissolution in 1987) with the sterilisation policies of the Norwegian government and removal of hundreds of children from parental custody came under his critical loupe in the latter book. However, Bredesen's criticism of such policies was tempered by his acknowledgment that he had personally gained significantly from being placed in a children's home and eventually adopted rather than returned to his biological parents. On the other hand, this *tater* refrained from subjecting the sterilisation policies to direct criticism in *Taterblod* but commented on them disparagingly elsewhere.

In terms of Norwegian domestic missions history, a critical analysis of *Taterblod* in its historical context can be particularly insightful because this quasi-autobiographical work both sheds light on the often difficult lives of the ethno-cultural group whose assimilation was a primary goal while the amelioration of its burdens was another and presents a subjective insider's mixed views of the Mission's goals and policies. Accordingly, in the present hybrid article we shall place this novel into the historical context of the efforts of the Norsk Misjon blant Hjemløse and its relationship to the debate in Norway over compulsory sterilisation.

This contextualisation includes the origins of Norwegian Christian investigations of and outreach to *tatere* beginning in the 1850s, the resurgence of such efforts by Norwegian Lutherans in the 1890s, the pivotal ministry of Ingvald B. Carlsen from 1918 until 1936, and legislation promulgated to facilitate the assimilation and control of that ethnic group. This will be followed by a consideration of a Church of Norway

2 Jamie S. Scott, "Missions and Fiction" in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 30, no. 3 (July 2008), 121-124, 126-128, and "Missions and Film" in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 30, no. 3 (July 2008), 115-120.

3 "Ein tater skriv si bok"*, Vårt Land* (Oslo), 12 June 1995, 17.

commission and its debated findings which *inter alia* indicted the Norsk Misjon blant Hjemløse for complicity in public policies which were called "compulsory sterilisation" and "ethnic cleansing". *Taterblod* is analysed as one of several critical responses to those conclusions. Bredesen's novel is then dissected as an artistically unrefined work of fiction but one rich in nuances which allow it to avoid being pigeonholed as either an undiluted defence of *tater* life and morality or a crass condemnation of the same.

Taterblod was not the first serious Norwegian attempt to portray in fiction the life of the ethnic group in question. Precisely when that may have been written is difficult to ascertain. However, one cannot overlook the novel *Fant*, which the eminent southern Norwegian writer Gabriel Scott published in 1928. That work with its unsanitised portrayal of social problems among the *tatere* was the focus of a study by Frederick Hale in the 1980s[4] but, owing to its essentially secular subject, *Fant* was not included in his groundbreaking work some four decades later that placed much of Scott's *œuvre* of the early twentieth century into the context of Norwegian doctrinal strife, the so-called *kirkestrid*.[5] A pivotal dimension of the novelty of *Taterblod* lies precisely in the attention paid to the Norsk Misjon for Hjemløse and why its policies of advocating mandatory sterilisation and the removal of children from the itinerant life of the *tatere* met with deep resentment.

The Historical Background and Origins of the Mission

The history of Christian social missions to the *tatere* in Norway is conventionally dated from the pioneering efforts of the Norwegian Lutheran pastor and sociologist Eilert Sundt in the middle decades of the nineteenth century. His 1850 book spanning nearly 400 pages, *Beretning om Fante- eller Landstrygerfolket i Norge*, was particularly significant in calling attention from a scholarly perspective to the tribulations of this segment of the population. However, Sundt's campaign to aid that ethnic group did not continue long beyond his death in 1875. By then the stream of financial support from the Norwegian government on which his work had been quite dependent had virtually dried up.

In 1893 Jakob Walnum, a native of Grimstad who was then serving as the pastor of the Church of Norway parish at Leikanger in Sogn, issued a public call for a renewal of a mission to the *tatere*. In a lengthy essay published in the Kristiania daily newspaper *Morgenbladet*, he proposed a strategy for both controlling and nurturing socially what he perceived as both a downtrodden and morally depraved segment of the country's human capital. Acting promptly and conscientiously, Walnum reasoned, was a Christian responsibility which his Christian compatriots should shoulder rather

4 Frederick Hale, "Gabriel Scott's *Fant* and Norwegian Social Reform" in *Edda*, 84, no. 1 (1984), 39-52.

5 Frederick Hale, *The Evolution of Gabriel Scott's Religious Thought*, publication forthcoming.

than relying exclusively on the government to carry it out. To a greater extent than Sundt, he believed that emphasis should be placed on extricating children from what he perceived as a *circulus vitiosus* in which the flaws of one generation were handed down to the next. As part of his multipronged strategy, Walnum urged the creation of a children's home designated for young *tatere* who were removed from the custody of particularly problematical parents. This, as we shall see below, was the germ of a policy which Bredesen discussed at length in *Taterblod*. Furthermore, Walnum did not mince words in calling for the implementation of compulsory labour (*Tvangsarbeide*) in labour colonies (*Tvangsarbeidshuse*), a proposal made decades earlier by Sundt, as part of the discipline to be imposed on adult members of the ethnic group – another policy which meets with stiff opposition in Bredesen's novel.[6]

Walnum remained a highly influential person in the mission which he had proposed. In 1897 he became the founding head of Foreningen til motarbeidelse av omstreifervesenet, which was later rechristened Den norske omstreifermisjon and in 1935 became the Norsk Misjon blant Hjemløse. In *Taterblod*, the final of these names is used consistently, if slightly anachronistically.

The principal representative of this organisation in Bredesen's novel is Ingvald Bernhard Carlsen, who shortly after earning his theological degree was appointed head of its labour colony at Svanviken in Nordmøre. By 1918 he was the general secretary of the Omstreifermisjon, a position he held until 1936. The organisation thrived under his leadership, and he reportedly enjoyed the respect of many *tatere*, despite divided opinions within the ethnic group about its policies – implemented in collaboration with the government's Social Department – of compelling many parents to surrender custody of their children and encouraging sterilisation.

Crucially from a missiological perspective, to the Lutheran clergyman Carlsen the Omstreifermisjon was not merely a social ministry agency but an instrument of evangelisation. He underscored this in his book of 1922, *Et hjemløst folk. Kort oversigt over arbeidet for omstreiferne i Norge*. Broadly speaking, Carlsen noted, the *tatere* were alienated not only from the mainstream of society but also to a considerable degree from the nation's public religious life. If the Norwegian people continued to view members of this ethnic community with fear and suspicion, he cautioned, they would remain social and religious outcasts. "Men med bøn og offervillig kjærlighet kan vi lede dem ind til et menneskelig liv, tilbake til samfundet og tilbake til God."[7]

Crucial to an understanding of the thematic content of *Taterblod* is an awareness of the controversial nature of these policies at the time and, in tandem therewith, of the prevailing notion that much of the socially unacceptable conduct of the *tatere* was genetically determined.

6 Jakob Walnum, "Tatersagen", *Morgenbladet* (Kristiania), 16 September 1893, 1.

7 Ingvald B. Carlsen, *Et hjemløst folk. Kort oversigt over arbeidet for omstreiferne i Norge* (N.p.: Luthersk Bokmission, 1922), 30.

In his retrospective report for the years 1927-1930, Carlsen implicitly admitted that his mission assumed it had the moral discretion as both a Christian agency and an instrument of society to direct the lives of Norway's *tatere*. He explicitly agreed with his predecessor Walnum that "mildhet og strenghet må gå hånd i hånd" and noted that through the years governmental policies towards the *tatere* had vacillated between "brutale forfølgelse og den mest godfjottede eftergivenhet". This inconsistency does not appear to have troubled Carlsen greatly. He acknowledged that the high crime rates among some of the *tater* families justified the application of strict measures. Carlsen emphasised, however, that recent scientific developments in criminology were calling attention to "den biologiske side ved omstreiferproblemet" – more specifically, he was convinced, that their antisocial behaviour was "noget naturgitt, noget medfødt som vi ikke kan rette pa." If reform of some individual *tatere* was thus virtually impossible, Carlsen reasoned, the only means of helping the most unfortunate families was to hinder their reproduction. But how? "Det er ennu et åpent spørsmål om dette best skjer ved sterilisering eller internering." The general secretary apparently did not doubt that whatever means were used, the intention was generally compatible with Christian ethics: "For et kristent livssyn vil det stille sig som em barmhjertig nødvendighet a hindre de aller ulykkeligste barn fra a bli født."[8]

Three years later, Carlsen was singing the same deterministic tune, though now pitched in a slightly higher key. He lauded Scott for tilting impressively at the romanticised image of *tater* life with his novelist's pen in *Fant* and that novel's sequel, *Josefa*, hopefully laying unrealistic notions to rest. In the same triennial report, Carlsen lauded the "samvittighetsfulle undersøkelser" of the prominent Norwegian eugenicist Johan Scharffenberg which demonstrated a correlation between adherence to the *tater* group and criminal behaviour in the largest clans: "Vi får se at ingen enkelt gruppe innen vårt folk fremviser tilnærmelsesvis så stor prosent av arvelig belastede og kriminelle personer."[9]

Strident Criticism and Apology by Bishop Stålsett in 1998

This increase in critical attention was making an impact on ecclesiastical life shortly before the end of the twentieth century. Revelations about alleged abuses in children's homes cropped up not only in the daily press but were also embedded in scholarly

8 Ingvald B. Carlsen, *Den norske omstreifermisjon. (Foreningen til motarbeidelse av omstreifervesenet) 1927-1930. Trearsberetning* [*sic*] (Oslo: Steenske Boktrykkeri Johannes Bjørnstad AS, 1931), 3-4.

9 Ingvald B. Carlsen, *Den norske omstreifermisjon (Foreningen til motarbeidelse av omstreifervesenet). 1. juli 1930 - 30. juni 1933. XII treårsberetning* (Oslo: Bøhler & Larsens Papirforretning og Trykkeri, 1934), 3-4.

studies of the *Romani*, eugenics, and compulsory sterilisation.[10] A primary catalyst that prompted Bredesen to write a second novel dealing with *inter alia* the Norsk Misjon blant Hjemløse and the treatment of *tatere* was a speech delivered by Bishop of Oslo Gunnar Stålsett at the assembly of the Church of Norway (*Kirkemøtet*) in November 1998. An internationally known ecclesiastical leader whose ancestral roots lay in the Kven people, a Balto-Finnic ethnic group in northern Scandinavia, Stålsett was keenly aware of the abuses to which many minorities were then being subjected in several parts of the world. Among them, the treatment of Bosnian Muslims and Croats in Serbia in the 1990s had given increased international currency to the term "ethnic cleansing", *i.e.* the forced removal of population groups from certain areas to reduce or eliminate demographic pluralism. He offered a blanket apology for what he portrayed as the complicity of the Norwegian Lutheran establishment in the mistreatment of the country's *Romani*. His indictment meshed with and appeared to corroborate complaints which the Romanifolkets Landsforening (National Association of the Romani People) had catalogued in a sharply worded document, not least with regard to the abuse of juvenile *tatere* who had been placed into children's homes administered by the Norsk Misjon blant Hjemløse.[11]

In the wake of initial acknowledgments of Stålsett's apology, various actions were taken to address the overarching problem. Among them, a "Romanifolket Taternes Fond" was established but, as Hans Morten Haugen has demonstrated, it soon became mired in controversy.[12]

Particularly noteworthy was an accord concluded between the Romani and the Church of Norway in May 1999 with the latter body's Mellomkirkelig Råd, or Ecumenical Council, playing a key role in the negotiations. The agreement included *inter alia* commitments to seek state funds as compensation for compulsory removals of children from their families and support for cultivating Romani culture. Although the Church of Norway as such did not have a budget to defray such outlays, it would ask its parishes to dedicate the collections taken on the Second Sunday in Advent that year, which preceded Human Rights Day by less than a week, for this purpose, according to the leader of the Mellomkirkelig Råd, Professor Tormod Engelsviken, who expressed hope that such measures would contribute to reconciliation.[13]

10 See, for example, Bjørn Hvinden (ed.), *Romanifolket og det norske samfunnet. Følgene av hundre års politikk for an nasjonal minoritet* (Bergen: Fagbokforlaget, 2000); Gunnar Broberg and Nils Roll-Hansen (eds.), *Eugenics and the Welfare State: Sterilization Policy in Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Finland* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1996).

11 "Stålsett om "etnisk rensing", *Vårt Land*, 10 November 1998, 1.

12 Hans Morten Haugen, "Den vanskelige forsoningen: Den norske kirke, Kirkens Sosialtjeneste og romanifolket/taterne", in *Teologisk tidsskrift*, 6, no. 3 (2017), 242-261.

13 "Avtale følger opp bønn om tilgivelse", *Dagen* (Bergen), 8 May 1999, 9.

At the turn of the century a significant governmental study of the official status of the Romani and other minority languages in Norway was undertaken. It eventually yielded two "white papers" about this matter. This aspect of relations between the *tatere* and the state was discussed in noteworthy detail by Jakob Anton Paul Wiedner in his doctoral thesis at the University of Oslo in 2016.[14] Wiedner's study marked a commendable advance in scholarly knowledge of the Romani langsuage, its relationship to Norwegian, and its legal and social status in Norway. Its historical synopsis of the history of the Romani in Norway is sketchy but useful. The Norsk Misjon blant Hjemløse was not one of Wiedner's concerns but, from a missiological perspective, his comments about the role of Pentecostal missionaries in providing some measure of social organisation for the Romani is significant.[15]

Not all agreed with the lengths to which certain leaders of the Church of Norway were willing to go in this endeavour. Jostein Vist and Agnar Austvik, who had served as the secretary general of the Mission and the director of its labour village at Svanvik, respectively, published in the Oslo Christian daily newspaper *Vårt Land* a lengthy editorial accusing the leadership of the Church of Norway of being self-righteously judgmental of well-intentioned ministries to the *tatere* and ignoring the many benefits which their organisation had given them.[16]

This was not Austvik's first dive into the troubled waters of debate over the Mission. Several weeks before the Church of Norway assembly, he had written a book, *Folket som reiste – og forsvant*, about the Mission and the people it sought to serve. Austvik acknowledged that there had been instances of abuse but insisted that they were generally only wrinkles in a broad tapestry of benevolence which had improved countless lives. Austvik also explained that early in the twentieth century *rasehygiene* was a neologism in Norway, a term unburdened by the negative connotations it would soon acquire. Finally, he believed that the intimate linkage between the Mission and the state bureaucracy proved ill-advised and ultimately detrimental to the former despite its short-term financial benefits.[17]

By Bredesen's own testimony, it was in response to what he perceived as a negatively distorted image of the Mission antedating but highlighted by the 1998 Church of Norway assembly that he elected to write *Taterblod* in an attempt to create a balanced picture of the Mission's endeavours. Bredesen could hardly have stated this more explicitly: "Boken er skrevet som en protest og innlegg i den ensidige innstillingen

14 Jakob Anton Paul Wiedner, "(De)mystifying Norwegian Romani – the discursive construction of a minority language" (Doctor of Philosophy thesis, University of Oslo, 2016), 137-148.

15 Wiedner, "(De)mystifying Norwegian Romani – the discursive construction of a minority language", 23.

16 Jostein Vist and Agnar Austvik, "Naar kirken dømmer", *Vårt Land*, 5 May 2001, 6.

17 "Bokprat og hjertilige gjensyn", *Tvedestrandsposten*, 3 September 1998, 2.

om tater og taterkulturen." He granted that members of the ethnic group were not always "Guds beste barn" and among their moral shortcomings mentioned that "de slåss, horet og drakk." On the other hand, Bredesen did not deny that the Mission did much that was indefensible with regard to sterilisation and lobotomies (though without mentioning that those operations were mandated by the Norwegian government and not by a Christian agency), but he emphasised that it also took care of large numbers of children and did much else that was praiseworthy. "Jeg savner en balansert framstilling," he confessed.[18]

Narrative Technique and Plot Summary

It should be borne in mind that *Taterblod* is essentially a work of fiction, though one encompassing constructed incidents and social conditions that were regarded as part of the warp and weft of the quotidian lives of the ethnic subgroup being portrayed. Many of these are unambiguously negative, *inter alia* immoderate consumption of alcoholic beverages, petty theft, begging in the streets of coastal towns of southern Norway, violent rivalries, and hatred of what some perceived as heavy-handed interference by public officials in matters that they believed were their own affair and beyond the pale of secular authorities. Perhaps most notably, the well-intending Ingvald B. Carlsen appears in what was probably a fictitious scene where he achieves little more than further alienating *tatere*. The line of demarcation separating historical fact from authorial licence is thus flexible in *Taterblod*.

Taterblod is neither complex in literary style nor convoluted in its plotting. Told by a nearly omniscient third-person narrator, it spans 210 pages and is divided into twenty-four chapters followed by Bredesen's "Etterord" titled "Taterne som minoritetsgruppe". Most of the narrative is linear; the few interruptions in this pattern are brief flashbacks. The recounted story begins early in the twentieth century and ends in the 1970s. Major leaps in the narrative make this span of time feasible in this relatively brief novel. *Taterblod* relates two families, one land-based, the other comprising *tatere* who sail around coastal Norway, chiefly calling at ports along the southern coast but occasionally venturing to the western shore of the land. Both families are religious to a noteworthy degree and interact with churches, legal authorities, and representatives of the Norsk Misjon blant Hjemløse in ways that Bredesen has constructed to highlight the hostility of the *tatere* to the above-mentioned policies of sterilisation and removal of children from allegedly vulnerable families for placement in designated institutional homes and possible adoption by foster parents who have stable lives ashore.

In many historical novels, it is possible to identify one character as the obvious principal spokesman for the author's arguments. That is not the case in *Taterblod*, however, despite its quasi-autobiographical nature. To some extent the narrative voice echoes what Bredesen said and wrote outside the text of this novel. Furthermore,

18 "Skriver om taterforeldrene sine", *Haugesunds Avis*, 23 September 2002, 10.

Bredesen resembles one of two young boys who are removed from their parents' care, but those two youths then disappear almost entirely from the narrative. Rather than expressing his views through the voice of a single character, Bredesen embodied them in the words and actions of several individuals, both *tatere* and others. This is in accordance with his previously quoted mixed views of the Christian and civil outreach to his parents' and his own generation during an era of rapid social transformation.

In the opening chapter, Bredesen introduces the first of these families who reside ashore, that of Brede Olaves. Atypically of *tatere* of his generation, this local patriarch can read and write; the narrator states that he enjoys the respect not only of his own kind but also of Norwegians who live ashore. Moreover, he is an occasional lay preacher and is endowed with vocal talent. Rather than evincing a whitewashed impression of his ethnic group, he directs much of his homiletics at the sins of its east-of-Eden members. Reinforcing his at times severe group indictment, he believes that "alle tatere kom fra Kain, han som på grunn av drapet på bror sin, Abel, ble bannlyst og senere fredløs og omflakkende."[19] Morally, Brede himself is a complex character. Despite his preaching against immorality, he occasionally engages in "nasking" (pilfering), justifying it on the grounds that he sells merchandise at low prices. His eldest son, Alexander, is a *tater* of a different hue, a conscientious worker but virtually illiterate. At age eighteen, this youth purchases a boat and begins an independent life, though one conforming to coastal sailing and irregular employment.

The second chapter begins with Karl Sjøgren, a former ne'er-do-well who gave up his roistering behaviour as a mining worker after nearly losing his life in an accident and undergoing a Christian conversion experience. In addition to running a small farm in southern Norway and working as a blacksmith, he serves as a lay preacher at the local *bedehus*. However, Sjøgren cannot fully accept that God has forgiven his past sins, and accordingly he maintains a severe faith that emphasises divine judgment and an intolerant attitude towards such matters as entertainment and secular literature. This alienates his daughter, Josefa (who perhaps coincidentally has the first name of a principal character in the previously mentioned novel about the *tatere* by Gabriel Scott), who rebels against his strictures and enters into a romantic relationship with the dashing young *tater*, Alexander Olaves. Her resulting pregnancy prompts her unflinchingly strict father to ban her from the family home. She gives birth to a son, Sivert Johan, and sixteen months later another, Karl Gustav, who is delivered prematurely by Caesarean section. Their marriage is eventually solemnised in an official church wedding. However, Josefa soon becomes disillusioned with the *tater* lifestyle, not least with having to sell merchandise door-to-door and beg. Alexander's alcoholism emerges as a burden to their family life. This malady becomes a recurrent theme in *Taterblod*, afflicting many members of the ethnic group.

After Josefa is apprehended for violating a law prohibiting women from taking their

19 Kristian Bredesen, *Taterblod* (Oslo: Lunde Forlag AS, 2002), 6.

children along on such errands, Alexander threatens the police who try to board his boat. In the wake of this incident, under considerable duress they are compelled to relinquish custody of their very young sons, who are placed into a home for juvenile *tatere* near Kristiansand but eventually adopted by a single woman. Efforts to contact them come to nought; Christmas and other presents remain unacknowledged. Alexander never sees his children again and eventually succumbs to complications of his alcoholism, though only after he and Josefa finally purchase a small house and first she and subsequently he become quite active church members.

Eventually, and through the intervention of a state church pastor, she is reconnected with Sivert Johan and Karl Gustav, both then middle-aged and successful in their educational careers, but lacking desire to see their birth mother again. Especially the latter son's reluctance is narrated in detail. Nevertheless, in the final two chapters they have a polite if unaffectionate reunion. Whatever bonding had once existed between Josefa and her sons has disappeared during roughly half a century without meaningful contact.

Throughout the narrative, Bredesen employs both narrative description and dialogue to disabuse readers of any romanticised notions of *tater* life. *Taterblod* includes frequent descriptions of, for example, alcoholism, dishonesty, physical suffering especially in the winter months, and the rhetorical justification of pilfering by members of this ostracised ethnic group. At the same time, however, Bredesen also underscores its members' essential humanity, and skills at such trades as tinkering and watch repair. Moreover, among some of them one finds a nucleus of Christian faith, not least in the figure of Brede Olaves. An underlying tone of *potential* assimilation in modernising Norwegian society is thus apparent. All of this, of course, meshes with Bredesen's qualified defence of the Norsk Misjon blant Hjemløse.

Unambiguously didactic elements are also embedded in the narrative. The narrator introduces the background of the mission and the hostility of some *tatere* to its policies in the first chapter, noting, for example, that among them Eilert Sundt and Jakob Walnum were not regarded as social saviours but rather as instruments of authoritarianism who initiated a long-term, existential threat to their lifestyle and laid the foundation for the placement of their sons and daughters in children's homes ashore. Readers are told the title of Sundt's groundbreaking *Beretningen om Fante- og Landsstrygerfolket* and exposed to Brede Olaves's embittered dismissal of it as a "hån mot den gruppen han tilhørte".[20]

Highlighting *Tater* Immorality

Bredesen's construction of his gallery of *tater* characters is not morally one-sided, but in the main they emerge as a behaviourally deficient lot. The extent to which their

20 Bredesen, *Taterblod*, 7.

shortcomings are consequences of their ostracism–or, alternatively, endemic to their ethnicity–is not specified. Regardless, the Olaves clan are undeniably portrayed as being to varying degrees in need of ethical renewal. The narrator's descriptions also call attention to flaws among the *tatere* in general.

Brede Olaves is established in the initial chapter as a man who enjoys the respect of both fellow *tatere* and land-dwelling Norwegians.[21] However, only a few paragraphs later the narrator compromises the description of this character by remarking that while in the main he is a law-abiding soul, he also pilfers.[22] Furthermore, in the chapter it is noted that the Olaves family are proud that one of their forebears was a friend of Gjest Bårdsen, the early nineteenth-century criminal from Sogndal whose sometimes romanticised popular reputation took on various dimensions because of his many escapes from custody.[23]

Thereafter, the image of the group's moral standards is dominated by Alexander's behaviour, much of which is highlighted as unsavoury and at times unambiguously illegal. His impregnating Josefa when she is seventeen years old is not narrated directly but revealed in her infuriated father's words when he chases her off the family farm. For that religiously regenerated but psychologically and ethnically captive Christian, "det verste av alt er at du skal ha barn med en tater."[24]

After they enter into an unofficial cohabitation relationship aboard his boat, Josefa's hitherto romanticised vision of *tater* itineracy begins to erode. A particularly striking incident is her *de facto* husband's admission that "en tater måtte være nådeløs ofte" and explanation that this can be necessary for self-defence in an environment where one who lacks the heart to be "hard" runs the risk of personal ruin.[25] No such rationalisation, however, can excuse Alexander's increasing dependency on alcohol and consequent violence. Josefa soon discovers that he became "ustyrlig av og til når drikken steg til hodet".[26] His volatility is described in detail when he resists the police and threatens them with an empty bottle.[27] Alexander's reliance on intoxicants is directly related to the work of the Mission. Whenever he recalls how, in his perception, he was compelled to sign a document relinquishing custody of his young sons, he resorts to the bottle in an effort to drown that bitter memory.[28]

Of a different stripe is Alexander's apparent indifference when Josefa begins to show symptoms of tuberculosis. Her coughing only elicits a response of irritation and

21 Bredesen, *Taterblod*, 5.
22 Bredesen, *Taterblod*, 8.
23 Bredesen, *Taterblod*, 9-10.
24 Bredesen, *Taterblod*, 36.
25 Bredesen, *Taterblod*, 45.
26 Bredesen, *Taterblod*, 63.
27 Bredesen, *Taterblod*, 67.
28 Bredesen, *Taterblod*, 85-86.

self-centredness: "Kan du 'ke prøve å holle opp me den gryling, kjærring," he asks cynically. "Æ får inte sova om natta."[29] This is offset only weakly by a brief reference to his visits to the institution where Josefa is treated, and on those occasions he wishes that he and his ill wife could be more "intim".[30] Furthermore, this still relatively young but alcoholic *tater* remains vengeful with regard to an incident in his youth when a young Norwegian farmer inflicted a severe wound on his cheek in response to Alexander's apparent interest in the latter's girlfriend. He seeks out his tormenter and, finding him shabbily dressed and with alcohol on his breath, draws his knife from its sheath and slashes him from his left ear to his chin. To commemorate this revenge, the musically gifted Alexander composes a song about it which he sings while accompanying himself on a guitar.[31]

Despite his misdeeds, nothing in the narrative indicates that Alexander has been arrested, let alone incarcerated. However, his unpunished dishonesty is laid bare. Immediately after the incident in which he and and his brother Oliver chase Pastor Carlsen away, Alexander and Oliver steal dozens of lobsters from a storage chest. Oliver voices weird justification for their theft: "De ville være til de fastboannes fordel om de viste oss reisannes noe mer respekt," he reasons, "å inte va så mistenksomme a sæ."[32] The convoluted logic of self-justification continues after Alexander shoots one of three lambs which apparently are the offspring of the same ewe. In a state of "perlehumør" on his boat, he boasts about the incident to Josefa. "Det e inte bra me trillinga, ha æ hørt. Ett a lammane fårlide å leve a. Om æ sko si de sånn, ha e gjort ei go jerning. En ska kje forakte det."[33]

The narrator suggests that Alexander might be suffering from a bipolar condition (though without using that terminology), declaring that he was "en person det ikke var lett å bli klok på". On the one hand, he could be tender, loving, and sensitive; on the other hand, "ingen kunne være mer hensynsløs og brutal."[34]

Is Alexander a completely atypical *tater*? The narrator suggests that he was not, despite his particular matrix of personal faults. His addiction to alcohol is presented as quite representative of the ethnic group. "Det var vanlig når tatere møttest, på sjø eller på land, at flaska kom fram," explains the narrator. Illustrating the point graphically, he adds, "Spriten blandet med krutsterk kaffe var velkomstdrikken."[35] This inclusive comment does not, however, counter the explicit linkage of Alexander's alcoholism and the loss of his two sons.

29 Bredesen, *Taterblod,*107.
30 Bredesen, *Taterblod*, 112.
31 Bredesen, *Taterblod*, 114-115.
32 Bredesen, *Taterblod*, 150-151.
33 Bredesen, *Taterblod*, 163.
34 Bredesen, *Taterblod*, 132.
35 Bredesen, *Taterblod*, 179.

It is challenging to generalise about the extent to which the *tatere* in Bredesen's novel have accepted and sought to live according to the Christian faith. Some of them have clearly become followers of Jesus Christ, perhaps most notably Brede Olaves. Moreover, after much vacillation Alexander finally follows Josefa back to active involvement in church life. Before that personal *metanoia*, however, he is portrayed as an autonomous soul who imagines that God needs him more than *vice versa*. This comes to the fore in the fifteenth chapter when Alexander and Josefa nearly lose their lives in a severe storm. She thanks God profusely for rescuing them, but he credits himself for their dodging death. Alexander explains that "Han kunne inte gjort så møe, Vårherre, ska æ si dæ, Josefa, dersomatte æ inte visste åssen æ sko navigere skuda gjennom brott å brenning." Cementing the point further, he adds, "Han derre Jesus Kristus i himmelens rige æ avhengi a at folk bruge hue, sjønneru." Josefa is shocked to hear her husband utter such blasphemy.[36]

Addiction to alcohol remains a recurrent theme in *Taterblod*, and it is manifested especially in Alexander's conduct. Nowhere is he absolved of personal responsibility for this dependency, but the narrator seeks to make it understandable as a reaction to what he has endured. "Han ble periodedranker og kunne gå på fylla i ukevis." The linkage between this self-destructive behaviour and the removal of his sons is made explicit: "Det var i en slik periode han mistet besinnelsen og reiv bildene av guttene ned fra ruffveggen og kastet dem på havet. Det var en hevn, ikke mot kona eller guttene, men mot misjonen og øvrigheten, mot lover og regler, som ubarmhjertig og urettferdig tok Sivert Johan og Karl Gustav fra ham og Josefa."[37]

The Portrayal of Norwegians Ashore

Bredesen's land-dwelling characters who are not affiliated with the Mission are relatively few, but some of them are relatively well developed. Only to a limited degree do they serve as foils to the *tatere* in *Taterblod*. For the most part, these people have little to commend them. That said, it is conspicuous that with exceptions those who are involved in church life tend to fare better under Bredesen's pen than do those who are not described as being ecclesiastically active.

The first major landlubber is Karl Sjøgren, who in his early life is a hard-drinking worker, a volatile, irresponsible man who is quick to use his fists and to gamble away his wages but explicitly devoid of any relationship to the divine. There is nothing subtle about Bredesen's portrayal of this "rabagast og livsnyter" and his colleagues who earn their daily bread as construction workers in mines, living for their wages and piece work bonuses. "Ellers preget en banal likegyldighet rallaren – med latterliggjøring av etiske normer, bannord of slibrige vitser."[38]

36 Bredesen, *Taterblod*, 143.
37 Bredesen, *Taterblod*, 130; see also 166, 168.
38 Bredesen, *Taterblod*, 16.

After Sjøgren undergoes a conversion experience in the wake of an accident, he emerges as a religious zealot. The fruits of the Holy Spirit are not completely absent in this small-scale farmer and blacksmith; he serves as a lay preacher in a *bedehus* and readily extends credit to his cash-strapped customers. However, Sjøgren apparently cannot accept his own status as a saved sinner; he remains spiritually trapped to a noteworthy degree in the past and accordingly finds it impossible to forgive other people. Furthermore, his narrow-gauged understanding of Christianity leaves no place in his modest home for even such innocuous reading material as the Danish fairy tales of H.C. Andersen. Such intolerance is juxtaposed with the far more loving and forgiving sort of faith which Josefa's confirmation pastor teaches her. Sjøgren's eviction of his pregnant daughter is thus not particularly surprising. To be sure, he belatedly acquires insight into the centrality of forgiveness in the Christian life shortly before death and writes to Josefa requesting it but succumbs before they are reconciled. By contrast, his wife Mathilde, though weakly developed as a literary character, is a kindly soul on a different spiritual wavelength from that of her husband. A more prosperous neighbour identified only as "Jens" is apparently not an ardent Christian but is portrayed as generous to people in that rural community.

A Skewed Portrayal of the Norsk Misjon blant Hjemløse

Notwithstanding Bredesen's professed intention of presenting a balanced image of the Norsk Misjon blant Hjemløse, the portrayal of that organisation in *Taterblod* is overwhelmingly negative. The deprecatory tone is set on the third page of the narrative. Brede Olaves is said to spit whenever Eilert Sundt is mentioned. That "fanteprest" and "forbryter", he believes, should be imprisoned for life. Olaves is particularly incensed that public funds are being used to remove children from parental custody and either place them into children's homes or make them available for adoption. His opinion of the Svanviken labour colony is similarly dark. Slightly anachronistically, Olaves has harsh words for Jakob Walnum as the founder of the Norsk Misjon blant Hjemløse. He is particularly incensed that his own ethnic group was perceived as "ukristelig" and comprised "hedninger" merely because the *tater* culture differed from that of people who lived ashore.[39]

The Misjon is subsequently portrayed disparagingly. Recounting the incident where Alexander and Josefa surrender custody of their two young sons, he describes how the man in his fifties who was working at the reception of the children's home and who "burde havne et sted der det var gråt og tenners gnissel" had commanded the young parents, "Skriv under her!" He did not seem to have possessed a trace of compassion.[40] Josefa and Alexander discover that they have no visitation rights after placing their

39 Bredesen, *Taterblod*, 7.
40 Bredesen, *Taterblod*, 86.

boys into that institution.[41]

One of Alexander's younger brothers, Oliver, and his wife have fared even worse at the hands of the Misjon in collaboration with the police. When in Arendal, four of their five children were taken (though the circumstances under which this occurred are not stated) and placed into diverse children's homes.[42]

The most direct confrontation between *tatere* and the Misjon is narrated in Chapter 15 when General Secretary Ingvald Carlsen calls on them in Arendal and uses Alexander and Josefa's boat as a venue for announcing his intention to conduct a census of the ethnic group. Trying to impress his audience with photographs of Svanviken, he merely alienates part of it. Oliver challenges his speech as "tullprat". This young Olaves confronts the visiting cleric and informs him bluntly about the loss of his and his wife's children. Oliver's indictment is blunt: "Æ mene du går i jevelens tjeneste." Unaccustomed to challenges by the people whom he was trying to serve, Carlsen resorts to evasiveness. Oliver counters by remarking that his wife was driven to the brink of suicide after losing four of her children and being committed to a psychiatric institution. There she had undergone sterilisation and a lobotomy. Her aggrieved husband renews his verbal assault on Carlsen by accusing him of hypocrisy. "Kom inte om bord her flere ganger å fortell oss at Jesus fra Nasarat har noe som helst med dette å bestille," he commands him. "Hvis du innbiller dæ en slig villfarels, så stakkars dæ å hele misjonskrapylet å resten a øvrigheda! Dere har noe å stå til rette for på dommens da."[43]

In most of *Taterblod* one finds very little to counter this recurrent negative portrayal of the Mission. Only in the final chapter when Sivert Johan and Karl Gustav meet their mother after half a century of separation is there a moderately positive acknowledgment of what it had done to uplift numerous children. This is followed by positive comments about the Misjon in Bredesen's Etterord, but by that point the largely critical presentation of the Mission in the text of *Taterblod* cannot be effectively reversed.

Reception of *Taterblod* in Norway

Taterblod found a mixed critical reception in Norway when published in 2002. Our consideration will be limited to two representative reviews that illustrate contrasting judgments. The Christian daily newspaper *Vårt Land* generally lauded Bredesen's novel as a "good and nuanced look at the lives of the *tatere*". That this paper's reviewer was impressed by the general story line is obvious; he credited the well-developed and sympathetic character Josefa for carrying much of the action along at a pace that maintained readers' interest. She is caught between the ridicule and rejection of settled Norwegians and following the dictates of her conscience. The underlying dilemma

41 Bredesen, *Taterblod*, 85, 87.
42 Bredesen, *Taterblod*, 144-145.
43 Bredesen, *Taterblod*, 146-150.

of choosing to surrender one's children to the Mission is also praised, as is what the reviewer concluded was Bredesen's even-handedness in dealing with the cleft between the commendable goals of the Mission and its strong-armed policies of removing children from their parents' custody. Josefa and Alexander's marriage, though burdened by his alcoholism, struck this reviewer as essentially a beautiful arrangement that persisted until his death, notwithstanding its obvious flaws. The only noteworthy point of criticism mentioned in *Vårt Land* was Bredesen's carelessness in dealing with chronology. The critic found it impossible to align Josefa's age of eighty-seven years with the ages at which she bore her two sons and the intervening half-century. Missing from this review is any mention of the recent criticism in the Church of Norway of certain policies of the Mission which had received considerable publicity in recent years.[44]

Bjarne Tveiten's review in the Kristiansand daily *Fædrelandsvennen* was cut from a far more critical bolt of cloth. He began on a condescending note by calling Bredesen's novel a "well-intended" description of the *Romani*. However, rather than using his review to evaluate the book's aesthetic or other merits, Tveiten exploited his space in one of southern Norway's principal newspapers to fire shots in the verbal skirmish over the Mission's and governmental treatment of the *tatere*. "Romanen er eit innlegg i debatten om norske styresmakter og Norsk misjon blant hjemløse naar det gjeld romanifolket," he explained. Tveiten identified the main thrust of Bredesen's rhetorical strategy: "Han prøver å dempe kritikken Norsk misjon blant hjemløse har fått, vise forståing, nyansere." But this unabashed tendentiousness, he thought, undermined whatever literary value the work might have, particularly because the harsh policies implemented by the civil authorities with the co-operation of the Mission made a verdict of even partial innocence impossible to sustain. Hence, Tveiten judged, "ei slike ufarleggjering vanskeleg å svelgje." He also expressed his hostility to the explicitly spiritual dimensions of *Taterblod*, confessing that "dei religiøse overtonane opplever eg som problematiske."[45] Specifically why they were problematical, however, he failed to state. Hence, his argument is truncated and lacks whatever cogency it otherwise might have had.

Conclusion

By the time Bredesen published *Taterblod*, Norsk Misjon blant Hjemløse was no more. In 1987 it established Kirkens Sosialtjeneste, which took over the properties, responsibilities, and debts of the older organisation, which ceased to exist as such. Kirkens Sosialtjeneste became a national body whose diaconal ministry extended far beyond the *tatere*. It was renamed Stiftelsen CRUX in 2017. In the interim, more of the social work which had been based in parachurch organisations was taken over

44 "Godt og nyansert blikk inn i taterenes liv", *Vårt Land* (Oslo), 29 October 2002, 18-19.
45 Bjarne Tveiten, "Godt meint om romanifolket", 21 October 2002, 10.

by governmental social agencies. Nevertheless, the intermittent stream of apologies continued for more than a decade after the appearance of Bredesen's second book. The governments of Prime Ministers Kjell Magne Bondevik and Jens Stoltenberg issued apologies in 1998 and 2000, respectively, for the shortcomings of civil authorities in their dealings with the *tatere*.

Most notably, in 2015 (coincidentally the year of Kristian Bredesen's death), for example, under the leadership of Secretary General Helmuth Liessem Kirkens Sosialtjeneste issued a statement lamenting publicly the violations of human rights that had been inflicted on *tatere* by the Mission which, it declared, had never fully acknowledged and apologised for some of its heavy-handed policies. The statement expressed deep regret for, among other things, the divisions which the Mission's policy of removing children against their parents' wishes had caused. At the same time, the beneficial work of the Mission was acknowledged: "Det er ingen tvil om at Misjonen gjorde mye godt for enkeltpersoner og at mange engasjerte medarbeidere bidro positivt i tatere/romanis liv. Begge deler finnes det vitnesbyrd om."[46] Presumably Bredesen could have replied "Ja og amen" to this two-fold confession and acknowledgment, which gave the lion's share of its space to the detrimental aspects of the Mission's policies.

As literary art, *Taterblod* does not fly at a high altitude. Aesthetically it is an undistinguished and unabashedly tendentious piece by a well-intending soul who regarded himself and his brother as both victims and beneficiaries of the policies of the Norsk Misjon blant Hjemløse. When one suspends demands for artistic finesse, however, this quasi-autobiographic novel is a striking and relevant contribution to the late twentieth and early twenty-first debate about the treatment of ethnic minorities in increasingly multicultural Norway as the roles of Christian domestic missionary endeavours were being re-examined and in some cases recast to fit the evolving social situation in the country. One needs only to juxtapose it with, for example, Tancred Ibsen's 1937 film *Fant*, which had been adapted from Gabriel Scott's similarly titled novel of almost a decade earlier, to see how starkly realistic Bredesen's novel is. That film offered viewers in economically challenged Norway a somewhat romanticised impression of *tater* life as largely insouciant. This is itself a distorted adaptation of the significantly more severe, if sometimes sympathetic, portrait which Scott had painted in his novel *Fant*.[47] The significance of *Taterblod* in Norwegian literary history thus lies in its unrelentingly realistic construction of the lives of members of the highlighted ethnic group. On the other hand, its place in the history of Norway's domestic missionary endeavours is unquestionably Bredesen's insistence that the efforts of the Norsk Misjon blant Hjemløse should be dispassionately examined both for such lamentable policies as

46 "Vi beklager på det sterkeste", *Vårt Land*, 1 June 2015, 14-15.

47 See the previously referenced Hale, "Gabriel Scott's *Fant* and Norwegian Social Reform", 39-52.

involuntary confiscation of children and the well-intentioned – and in his personal case – ultimately beneficial extraction of young *tatere* from dysfunctional families where they were evidently at risk.[48]

48 In a tangentially related incident, in 2023 it was reported in the Norwegian press that the Church of Norway, under the leadership of Bishop Eivind Berggrav (who later gained renown for his leadership of the national Lutheran church during the German occupation of 1940-1945) of Hålogaland in northern Norway, was deeply involved in domestic espionage against the Kven people during the 1930s. Berggrav and many other churchmen feared a potential alliance between the Kven and Sami people (the latter popularly called "Lapps") which could pose a security problem for the country. See "Kirke drev etterretning mot kvenene", *Vårt Land*, 2 June 2023, 8-9.