



# **Welfare and Religion in a European Perspective: Introduction to a Europe-Wide Research Project**

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The aim of the project Welfare and Religion in a European Perspective (WREP) has been to look at the role of majority churches as agents of social welfare across different European societies. Its essence can be found in the following questions:

- what roles do the historic churches of Europe play within the different welfare systems that exist in the continent?
- to what extent are they providers of welfare?
- how, more broadly, how do they influence welfare at a normative level - either through their historical roles or through continuing public debate? - and finally,
- how do these activities match, or fail to match, with public expectations?

The background to the project lies in (a) the significant economic and social changes currently taking place in all developed societies, not least in Europe and (b) an equally significant set of changes which relate to religion. Taken together these transformations challenge existing models of welfare organisation. The task moreover is highly topical: questions concerning the organisation of social welfare are high on the political agenda all over Europe.

## **Methodology**

The project focuses on the role of the church in eight European societies with different social welfare models and different church traditions: Sweden/Finland/Norway (social democratic/Lutheran), England (liberal/Anglican), Germany (corporate/mixed religiously), France/Italy (corporate/Catholic), and Greece (corporate/Orthodox).

The case studies have been conducted in a medium-sized local

authority or town in each country. The methodology combines quantitative and qualitative approaches with an emphasis on the latter. The data that are emerging from these investigations are exceptionally rich. Interestingly, with regard to welfare provision and the role of the churches within this, there is more commonality across Europe at the local level than between different nation states.

### **Sociology, theology and gender**

The results will be analysed from three different perspectives - sociology, theology and gender - each of which has contributed to the shaping of theory and method used in the case studies. Taken together these perspectives enable a better understanding of the connections between churches, church organisations and other welfare agents, within the context of different welfare regimes, different theological traditions and different approaches to gender.

For example, in the Nordic countries, there has been a steady professionalisation of welfare, but it remains a sector in which women are disproportionately present (as paid professionals). Welfare is the concern of the state: the family and the churches fill the gaps left by the state. In much of Southern Europe these roles are reversed: the state fills the gaps left by the family and the churches. Women, however, are once more, disproportionately present, but in the family rather than as paid professionals. All of Europe is subject to increasing demands on welfare (formal and informal) as the dependent sectors of the population continue to grow, relatively speaking. The demands on women increase correspondingly.

For further details regarding personnel, publications and the case studies themselves, please see <http://www.student.teol.uu.se/wrep/>.

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