Introduction

With this paper I want to present a recently initiated research project within the field of welfare, gender and religion. The project was initiated in March 2003 and will continue at least until the beginning of 2007. The overall aim of the project is to analyse the function of majority churches as agents of social welfare. What are these big historic churches actually doing as providers of welfare in contemporary society? In which areas do they contribute, and why? Which function do they have within the different welfare systems? Which expectancies do they meet and how do they meet these expectancies? How do they influence welfare on a more normative level, through their historical role and through public debate? These are questions which we hope will be answered through our project.

Majority Churches

The project will focus largely on majority churches (and allied organisations), which have been of historic importance in forming European identity. Eight countries will be compared: Sweden, Finland, Norway, England, Germany, France, Italy and Greece. Social welfare is organised differently in each of these. The majority churches also have differing theologies and social/ethical standpoints. The results will be analysed on a European level as well as reconsidered within each national situation. The project is initiated from Sweden and has its head-quarters at the Uppsala Institute for Diaconal and Social Studies. The institute is run in collaboration between Uppsala University and a Swedish Diocesan institution, Samariterhemmet. We are a group of researchers coordinating the project, under the leadership of professor of religion Anders Bäckström, who directs the project with the assistance of professor Grace Davie, at Exeter University in Great Britain.

Religion, Welfare and Gender

The location in Sweden means that Sweden will be taken as starting point for the development of theory and methods. This is the stage we are in at the moment, as the project was granted financing from the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation last year. Three perspectives will dominate our research questions. These are sociology, theology and gender. My specific responsibility within the project is the coordination of the gender aspects. Gender and welfare is a well established area of research in several European countries today. The specific contribution of this project will be to bring religion/theology into this discussion. The European majority churches have been of historic importance in forming identities also with regard to gender. Today the churches appears as actors, both as welfare providers and public voices. Our aim is to identify patterns of gender and power which emerge as the majority churches act as agents of welfare. These patterns will be interpreted against the background of the respective countries and church traditions. I will come back to this in the latter part of my paper. First I want to give a general overview over how the project is planned.

Background
**European Welfare Undergoing Change**

In a European context the concept ‘social welfare’ can be summarized as a collective understanding of co-operation between people (Hettne 1997). The general background of the project is related to European society undergoing significant economic and social changes and simultaneously also changes which are related to religion (European Value Study). All of these changes are challenging existing models of welfare organisation.

Processes of privatisation and detraditionalisation coincide with economic and social deregulation within the framework of an increasingly global economy (Jacobsson 2000). At the same time both search for new lifestyles and new forms of regulation is developing at a transnational level. These major changes are closely related to the developing service economy. The new society emerging is no longer organised around factories, mass consumption and large popular movements, but rather around centres of knowledge, often with the focus on technical/biological research and individual consumption, where individual quality of life is emphasised (Andersson/Sylwan 1997). Value generating capital to an increasing extent consists of non-material resources, primarily connected to so-called human capital, i.e. to the competence of particular individuals (Pettersson 2000, Edvardsson 2000). Competence is associated with a combination of formal knowledge, social competence and creative capacity (Giddens 1999).

In this advanced modern society old class and gender boundaries are dissolved. But this does not mean that poverty is left behind. Large sectors of the population risk exclusion from the benefits of general economic growth. We can see a “new” poverty arising, largely unrelated to the poverty of early industrial society. This new poverty is rather a product of a European society where national welfare systems are challenged by unemployment, immigration and an aging population (Schoenig-L’Hoest 1996).

**Welfare and Gender**

The changes mentioned above also include changes which concern gender. The model of the male breadwinner, who provides for his wife and children, has dominated industrial society and has been taken for granted in most discussions on family based welfare. Today this model is left behind in most European countries (Amitsis et al 2003). This goes to an increasing degree also for the southern European countries. Women’s labour are increasingly asked for on the market. Women’s unpaid caring for family and relatives as a prerequisite for the organisation of welfare is however seldom questioned. This has created a new situation where new demands of double or even triple work are laid on women. Sometimes the upcoming problems are solved with the help of immigrant women (Stark and Regnér 2001).

The economic and political changes affecting the relationships between public services, the voluntary sector, individual/family and private economy are not gender neutral. It has been suggested that the public and voluntary sectors are overtaking a “feminine” role in society, which implies a marginalisation to the benefit of the “masculine” and private sector which dominates the global market economy (Marchand 2000).

The changes in society described above prompt a number of questions concerning shared values and the methods of organising social welfare and care. Issues of welfare are of high priority both at national and at a European level today (Amitsis et al 2003). Questions regarding the values that underpin welfare must therefore be addressed, bearing in mind that they will be realised in different ways in the various national contexts of Europe.

**The Churches as Agents of Welfare**

Within this complex situation, we can see that religion appears both as welfare provider and public voice (Beyer 1994, Casanova 1994). Even if the separation of religion and society lies at the heart of modern society, both the authorities within social care and the majority of the European population welcome the voice of the church in the welfare debate (Davie 2000, 2002). Expectations of the role of the churches as welfare providers may be interpreted both as a result of the economic and social
problems which have become clear during the 1990s and of increased insecurity regarding the basic conditions for welfare. This trend is international although it can appear differently in different places.

On-going tendencies towards the deregulation of care and education influence the organisation of social welfare in a number of European countries, regardless of starting points. This is also a background to the new expectations on churches as providers of care and creators of moral consensus in society. These changes raise fundamental questions concerning the identities of majority churches and their possible roles in society. In a Europe, which is becoming increasingly integrated, there is a growing need for the churches to reflect on their function in society taking account of theological and ecclesiological considerations. At present, expectations of, as well as uncertainty surrounding the function of the churches in the welfare sector is growing: precisely which tasks should the church take on?

The Concept of Social Economy
When we choose to focus on religion through a study of the dominating Christian traditions in Europe we see the churches as agents within an expanding social economy. The concept of “social economy” is increasingly recognised as a title for non-profit making voluntary organisations. Qualified research has in recent years been done on the expanding role of the social economy in a European context (e.g. Borzaga and Santucci 1998, Pestoff 1998). The Swedish government’s “Working Group on the Social Economy and its Development” offers the following definition: “In Sweden, social economy means organised activities which have the good of society as their primary aim and which build on to democratic values and are organised independently of the public sector. These social and economic activities are carried out mainly by charities, co-operatives, trusts and similar groups. Activities within the social economy have the good of society or its members and not profit, as their driving force” (Report from a Working Group 1999). Unlike for example the Johns Hopkins project (Salamon and Anheier 1997) and the EUROVOL project (Gaskin and Smith 1995), the focus in this project will not be on the voluntary or nonprofit sector as a whole, but specifically on the role of majority churches as agents of welfare.

Welfare and Religion in Sweden
The project provides both continuation and follow up to the Swedish research programme “The state and the individual: Swedish society undergoing change”, supported by the Swedish Research Council and carried out by the universities of Uppsala, Karlstad, Stockholm and others. The programme included detailed studies of religious and social change in Sweden (From State Church to Free Folk Church 1999). Three of the studies act as pilots for the current project: 1) The analysis of the relationship between the local church and social services provided by the local authority shows that the Church is expected to contribute complementary welfare services (Bäckström 2001). 2) An outline of provision of social welfare by religious organisations in one Swedish locality shows that there is considerable uncertainty regarding the content of the complementary role of the Church (Jeppsson Grassman 2001). 3) A comparison of the position of diaconal work in Sweden and Germany highlights the similarities and differences towards the organisation of social welfare in the two countries (Leis 2002). These studies build on to earlier research, both Swedish and international, on the role of the churches and voluntary organisations regarding social identity and welfare. (SOU 1993:82, Amnå 1995).

Deacons in the Church of Sweden has in recent years given given witness to a renewed poverty, where an increasing amount of people turn to the church to get food and help with cash, a situation we thought we had long left behind. Today it is not uncommon to see beggars in the cities, something we did not see ten or twenty years ago. On a more general level Nordic studies of welfare however show that the Swedish social welfare system compares well in an international perspective (Kauto et al, ed, 1999 and 2001). The Swedish state-financed investigation “vålfärdsbokslutet” leaves the question open whether the 1990s, with increased poverty, marginalisation of specific groups etc, should be regarded as an isolated negative incident or whether it represents the beginning of a long-term change within the social welfare sector (SOU 2000:3).
With regard to attitudes towards voluntary work for non-profit-making organisations Sweden ranks relatively high compared with the majority of western countries (Gaskin and Smith 1995). However, relatively few Swedes perform services of social welfare on a voluntary basis. Studies such as “Demokratiutredningen” and “Välfräsbsboksolutet” show how new organisations are emerging within the welfare sector, e.g. local village groups, co-operative movements and self-help groups (SOU 1999:84, SOU 2001:79). Further research for “välfräsbsboksolutet” shows that the number of welfare services operating privately in Sweden doubled in the seven-year period 1992-99 (SOU 2001:52). The situation is therefore complex and requires further investigation.

Church Traditions, Gender and Welfare regimes
In the welfare sector churches can be seen as theologically motivated bearers of values of co-operation and care. At the same time the organisation of social welfare differs according to national context. Church traditions are relevant at this point: due to differing theological starting points churches relate in differing ways to involvement in social issues. In the Nordic countries the Lutheran folk church embraces the doctrine of ‘two kingdoms’, which ascribes a particular role to the state in the organisation of social welfare.

In Italy, Germany and France, Catholic social teaching has been influential through the so-called concept of subsidiarity, providing welfare services at the lowest effective level in society. This is especially evident in Italy where women, through their role in the family, have a particular social responsibility (European Identity, Welfare State and Religion(s) 2001). This southern European model contrasts with the Nordic one, sometimes described as “women-friendly” (Hernes 1987), where the public sector often takes responsibility for similar tasks. It is worth to observe though, that women dominate to an overwhelming degree also in this sector.

In Germany the situation is more cohesive, with both Protestant and Catholic (diaconal) welfare organisations (Wohlfahrtsverbände) having a crucial role in providing different kind of services. In Britain the Anglican Church functions both as a provider of social welfare services (via independent organisations) and as a critical voice in society (Faith in the City 1985 and Faith in the Countryside 1990).

The Greek-Orthodox Church has maintained a distance from society well into the twentieth century. Now, even within this church there is a tendency to increased social involvement (cf. The Orthodox Academy of Crete 1978, Strohm 2000).

Four European social welfare models
The choice of countries for our project means that we will be able to include the four major social welfare models, which are evident in Europe (Hanesch et al 2000, Esping-Andersen 1990):

1) The liberal social state model typical of Anglo-Saxon countries, i.e. England, the USA, Australia and New Zealand. Here responsibility is taken by the state for basic social welfare issues while independent agencies are also given considerable freedom. This model will be represented by England.

2) The social democratic model typical of the Nordic Countries (Sweden, Norway, Finland, Iceland and to some extent Holland) gives the state overall responsibility for general social welfare, while voluntary organisations provide complementary services. This model will be represented by Sweden, Norway and Finland.

3) The co-operative and conservative model found mainly in continental Europe (Germany, France, Austria, Belgium and to some extent Holland). Within this model too the state has responsibility for the social welfare framework, while bodies of various kinds (even including professionals) play a defining role in providing social welfare services. This model will be represented by Germany and France.
4) Countries in southern Europe also relate to the conservative model, but here the state plays a weaker role compared with that of the family. (Italy, Greece, Portugal and Spain). This model will be represented by Italy and Greece.

**Four European Church Traditions**

The eight countries also can be said to represent four major European church traditions: In Sweden, Norway and Finland 85% of the population belongs to the Lutheran/Protestant church. In Italy and France 90% and 70% of the population respectively belongs to the Roman Catholic Church. In England about half of the population belongs to the Anglican Church. In Greece ca. 90% belongs to the Orthodox Church and in Germany ca. 40% of the population belongs to the Roman Catholic Church and 40% to the Protestant churches (collectively ca. 80%). The project will reveal differing degrees of religious pluralism. Minority churches and other religions will, however, be given less attention than the majority churches.

**Method and Material**

**Case Studies in Eight Countries**

The project builds on case studies made in one locality in each of the eight countries. The studies will document, analyse and interpret the interaction between social welfare providers, the respective majority churches (and associated organisations) and local institutions; they will also investigate the attitudes of the population towards these agencies. The case studies will be carried out following the principle of triangulation, using qualitative and quantitative methods (including interviews, the study of documents and in some cases questionnaires).

Data will be collected which document both the official theological positions of the respective churches, and theology as expressed in words and actions. The respondents will be registered as men and women and specific questions with regard to gender will be included.

The studies will be carried out by researchers who are experienced in the national and local situation in terms of language, culture and religion. The data will be interpreted and analysed in its respective national and church context. The analysis does not aim to provide national generalisations but rather qualitative understanding and a basis for comparison and comprehensive analysis.

**European Comparison and Comprehensive Analysis**

By means of the case studies the project will gain a comprehensive and clear picture of the forms of co-operation in the localities and national contexts studied – that is the expectations of both authorities and people regarding the role of the churches as providers and as participants in debate, and the significance of theological motivations. The results will then be considered from a theoretical point of view, using three more precise perspectives: 1) sociological 2) theological and 3) that of gender.

1) *The sociological perspective* asks fundamental questions about the relation between different societal actors and about the basis of European co-operation. This involves complex questions regarding the status of majority churches in a modern and plural society. In the countries studied the churches have had a connection to the state through different types of “contract”. These can be interpreted as an expression of a European and “public” model, which cuts across different theological understandings. Whether this model is undergoing change is a central question in our research and relates in turn to the debates surrounding the private and public roles of religion in modern pluralistic societies.

The sociological comparison of the results of the case studies aims to compare the ongoing local co-operation between the church and public authorities as well as the importance of this co-operation for the organisation and provision of social welfare services. It will also compare the expectations of different local authorities concerning the services provided by the church with respect to each country’s social welfare system. In addition a comparison will be done between the attitudes of the
respective local populations to the function of the churches as actors and moral voices in the welfare debate.

Taken as a whole the sociological component will help to illuminate the actions of the respective churches at a local level, both as providers of social welfare services and as opinion-forming advocates. By focusing the on-going changes in society at a local level we hope to be able to contribute new insights regarding the role which the majority churches can play within the framework of various welfare systems.

II) The theological perspective touches on questions of motivation – firstly with regard to the role of local agencies, but also with respect to the possible and desired function of the churches within the framework of the modern welfare society. Societal changes raise a number of questions surrounding the identity and task of the churches. The comparative focus of the project enables analyses which override confessional positions, given that the major Christian traditions in the world are represented.

The theological comparison of the results of the local studies thus aims to compare the churches’ views of their own functions in society within the framework of differing welfare systems. The comparison will highlight the differences between a variety of church traditions with respect to a) local standpoints and practice, b) official theological standpoints and rhetoric, mainly at a national level, together with c) comparisons and contradictions between these levels within each country. The results of the case studies will be interpreted as one of several expressions of the theologies of the respective churches. In this way local praxis can be seen in relation to the theological and social/ethical standpoint at a national or, in the case of the Roman Catholic Church, even at an international level. Relationships and tensions concerning the involvement of churches at different levels can in this way be clarified. In this way emergent European patterns can be analysed.

The concluding analysis addresses the ecclesiological and normative question what should the church do? (cf. Rothstein 2002: What should the state do?). This question is related to the issue of the churches possible and hoped for roles within the framework of a modern Europe.

III) The gender perspective asks questions about the responsibilities of women and men and their possibilities to influence in churches and other organisations within the social economy. Do current processes of change contribute to traditional values of care being perceived as a female domain within both the public and voluntary sectors? This question relates in turn to the bigger issue if the entire welfare domain is being marginalised in contemporary Europe, given the dominance of the “new” transnational market economy.

The gender related comparison intends to compare the results from the case studies with respect to the importance of gender. Firstly, the intention is to compare the male and female responsibilities and their influence within church-based care; secondly to compare gender related attitudes as they are reflected in interview and questionnaire material and thirdly to compare the theological standpoints of the churches with respect to gender-related questions regarding family and care. Thus the comparison will crosscut both social welfare and theological systems.

The outline of the study will make it possible to carry out an analytical discussion of the relation between values of gender and care in relation to ongoing processes of change and social welfare solutions. The analysis will sum up in a constructive discussion of the importance of gender in relation to the general question of the role of majority churches in society and their possible contribution to future social welfare provision.

The Relevance of Gender, Religion and Welfare

Having provided a general outline of the project I now want to turn more specifically to the relevance of this specific type of study from a gender perspective. During the 1990s an increasing amount of studies have been produced in the field of gender and welfare in a Scandinavian, but also a European perspective. Through this research it has become obvious that gender regimes and welfare regimes do
not always coincide. In a study from 1999 Diane Sainsbury shows that the established welfare state typology breaks down at several points when gender is brought into the analysis. On the other hand, gender regimes also tend to fragment when welfare state types are included (Sainsbury 1999). This above all shows the importance of being very clear about the theoretical underpinnings of the approach applied in a study of welfare.

As I have made clear our ambition is to specifically study the role of religion in the organisation of welfare provision in a rapidly changing European context. We have found it important to make gender into one of our specific interests in this study. The reasons for this are several and each of them will influence the outline of the project.

Women as Care-givers

The first reason has to do with the traditional, and still prevailing, dominance of women as care-givers. The crucial role of women in the organisation of welfare is maybe most obvious in the primarily southern parts of Europe where much of social responsibility still lies on the family. In reality this most often means that it depends on women doing unpaid work for their relatives, and sometimes also neighbours. But also in Sweden where the public authorities has taken over much of this responsibility the situation is in terms of gender-division of tasks very similar. “School, health and care” has in Sweden become a political mantra summarising the areas of public welfare responsibility. These sectors of working life are numerically dominated by women. As an example I can tell you that among the thirty most common occupations in Sweden only two have an equal share of women and men (40-60 % of each). Among the occupations dominated by women lower positions in health care and children’s care dominate (SCB/Statistics Sweden 2002). To a certain degree these areas are also politically dominated by women, as they are the areas where female politicians most often are engaged and have the highest possibility of getting a position. The situation in the church of Sweden is in this respect very similar to the pattern in society at large, with occupations like deacon and youth assistant highly dominated by women.

In for example Germany the organisation of welfare is different, with a much stronger role for voluntary organisations, and among them the churches. But the same pattern emerges, that women numerically dominate among the persons actually doing the work.

One consequence of the dominance of women in the field of welfare provision for the carrying out of our research, is that it underlines the importance of focusing of women’s agency. In the organising of welfare women are not only passive objects of paternal care, or threatening neoliberal market forces. As Harriet Silius (2002) has pointed out, women were present both as designers and recipients of early welfare state politics. These maternalistic roots of welfare state history remains however largely unknown. As far as the churches are part of this history we want to contribute to making it visible.

The Gendered Character of Needs

A second reason for including gender is that needs for organised welfare are not gender-neutral. This is a consequence of the gendered character of ongoing changes, but also a consequence of prevailing gender systems. A bit simplistic we can say that welfare states are more important to women than to men because women are poorer (Silius 2002). Some typically gendered needs are also well recognised. I think for example of the situation of elderly elder, where women are in a majority, as an example, or the situation for lone mothers, who are one of the groups which in Sweden have been observed to be mostly negatively affected by the economic recession in the beginning of the 1990’s (SOU 2001:79). Others needs are more controversial, like the need for protection against male violence, or against the market-interests in different kinds of sexual services.

One consequence of this for our study is to be observant as to which degree the churches direct their actions specifically towards women in special need and dares to cope with more controversial issues, like the trafficking in women. Theologically the social role of the church is often divided into the performance of direct services on the one hand and a more prophetic role on the other hand. Direct services may for example consist of running a hospital, a home for elderly or a pre-school on behalf of
a local municipality, which pays the church/church organisation for the services provided. This has not been so common in Sweden hitherto, primarily because of a strict legal division between the tasks of the parishes and of the local municipalities. The restrictions in this respect did however cease with the new relationship between state and church the 1st of January 2000. We can already see that this has opened a new field for the Church of Sweden as provider of welfare services (Thidevall 2002). The prophetic role may be exemplified by deacons in a nearby parish here in the diocese Lund recently protesting against the cutbacks in public services towards the elderly (Sydsvenska Dagbladet 1 November 2001).

From a gender perspective what will interest us is to what degree both these types of church agency, service provision and prophetic action, is directed towards for example violence against women, trafficking in women, or the situation of immigrant women.

The Ambiguity of Religion

A third reason to include gender in this study is that ongoing changes in gender and family patterns in Europe actually constitute one of the major challenges for the welfare systems (Amitsis et al 2003). The fall of the male breadwinner model, loosening of family bonds due to new patterns of migration, new constellations of extended families, and the legal establishment of same-sex partnerships are all changes which challenges welfare systems built on the gendered roles of the nuclear family. It is however important to realise that these changes also constitute challenges towards welfare systems, such as the Swedish, were the nuclear family is a more hidden prerequisite.

Ongoing changes with regard to gender challenge the welfare systems of Europe. How the different systems respond to the changes may in turn cause new changes with regard to gender. I think that we also can say that the churches have a role in all this. As I have already mentioned initially the identity-forming role of the European churches have also had a major influence on gender identities. Gender and theology play together when God’s will with humanity is used as an argument for one order or another between women and men. Exactly which order has been legitimised with divine arguments has however differed. I want to stress this because I think a deeper understanding of the role of the churches with regard to gender must include the ambiguity of the churches’ position in relation to women. In many ways the churches have put hindrances on the way towards emancipation for women, but churches may also serve as refuges for some women in specific situations (Beckman 2001). One example which has already surfaced in our project is the Roman-Catholic church in Italy acting on behalf of immigrant women “imported” to serve in private households to make up for the “caring deficit” which occur when women enter the labour market and are not able to uphold their traditional role in the household.

The ambiguous role of the churches is important to stress as much of feminist studies either have ignored the role of religion or sketched a one-sided negative picture of the role of religion. A Swedish researcher in women’s history has even launched the term “religion-blind”, taking the inspiration from the widely established term “gender-blind”, in relation to previous research into the Swedish emancipation process (Hammar 1999).

I do not want to deny that church traditions in different ways have given divine legitimisation to structures of subordination of women. It is also a fact that Christian mainstream traditions have taken a conservative stance in relation to many important steps in the emancipation of women.

Annette Borchorst states in an paper on “Welfare state regimes, women and the EC” that the social teaching of the Roman-Catholic church has directly sought to curtail women’s options. She exemplifies how the church still argues in favour of family-based welfare with a quotation from the pope John Paul II. The pope argues against extended state responsibility with reference to the principle of subsidiarity. He states that “A community of a higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of a lower order, depriving the latter of its functions, but rather should support it in case of need and help to coordinate its activity with the activities of the rest of the society, always with a view to the common good.” (John Paul II, quoted in Borchorst 1996:33)
The social teaching of the Roman-Catholic church on subsidiarity has meant a strong emphasis of the role of the family, which in reality most often has meant women. In this way there is a close relation between the principle of subsidiarity and the teaching of the Roman-Catholic church on the role of women, stressing their reproductive role both principally and in actual work. This policy has also been supported by Christian Democratic Parties all over Europe, also in Sweden, where this party argues for a special benefit for parents who stay at home with their children.

Protestant countries have in general showed a higher rate of women in paid labour (Siaroff 1996). But it would be simplistic to draw a line in this respect between one church tradition or the other. Rather I want to argue that the ambiguity with regards to the interests and influence of women goes right through every major church tradition. In Sweden a gender-dividing teaching was widely spread through the teaching in church and school of the catechism of Martin Luther. The catechism taught that the roles - the calling, in Lutheran vocabulary - of women and men were strictly complementary, with the man as the head of the household an the woman as spouse and mother. The role of the man was to represent the household in public, the woman was responsible for the inner maintenance of the household. Her role was in the private.

Annette Borchorst in her article argues for further studies of the role of religion, although she thinks secularisation in the Nordic countries has diminished the influence of the church. Recent studies within the sociology of religion however indicate that the influence of the Nordic folk-churches is more pervasive than what is obvious from a secularisation perspective, as culture and religion have been so very closely intertwined in the creation of national identity in these countries (Bäckström et al, forthcoming).

**Churches as Agents of Women?**

Feminist research on gender and religion has rightly criticized mainstream research on welfare state typology for not taking the role of the family into enough consideration, alongside the state and the market. The inclusion of the perspective of the family is crucial from a feminist perspective, although it is complicated given the major divergences in respect to what “family” might mean. As far as I have been able to see feminist researchers have however not paid much attention either to the role of the voluntary sector, or to the role of religion within this sector, in their critique.

The major church traditions have all had a historic influence on the forming of different welfare regimes. This is reason enough to explore their function also in contemporary Europe. The historic influence of the churches in the forming of gender identities is a second reason to explore the role of the churches in the present.

One hypothesis to be verified in our project is that the role of the churches in relation to gender and welfare is ambiguous. From other studies we know that the same church tradition may represent a very conservative stance in its view of gender and sexuality and still serve as a vehicle for women to support other women. The churches in daily life often function as major women’s organisations, disregarding the fact of the dominance of men in leadership and major public roles. The World Council of Churches (WCC), a world-wide ecumenical church organisation, launched a decade 1988-1998 for *Churches in Solidarity with Women*. In a report from the Decade the words were turned around, and the authors stated that the decade in reality often was realised as a decade of *women in solidarity with women* (Living Letters 1997).

“The Swan Song of the Welfare State” is the last and fateful headline in Harriet Silius’ contribution on feminist perspectives on the European welfare state in a recently published reader in European Women’s Studies (Griffin and Braidotti 2002). She refers to scholars proclaiming the death of the welfare states, due to the rival interests of the global market forces and neoliberal ideology.

One of the hopeful signs she identifies is the emergence of competing forces in the form of transnational social movements, and among them women’s organisations. What I hope that our project
will be able to show is that the churches of Europe can be seen as part of such a transnational movement, in the form of a worldwide Christian church, where women are active and strong, and often play a crucial role. The churches of Europe carry with them into the new millennium important traditions of solidarity and defence of human dignity, although their baggage is also in many respects ambiguous. The great days of the European churches are probably over. Christianity today grows mainly in the Third World, where Christians no longer mildly accept directives from Europe. As agents of welfare the European churches might also be part of a “feminisation”, which imply that they are being marginalised in relation to stronger global economic forces, which also might constitute a threat towards welfare states and political democracy. If this is really the case, it will be the more crucial to clarify the function of the churches in the European organisation of welfare, and then also with regard to its many gendered aspects. Such a contribution may facilitate for the churches to take a clear stance in favour of the interests of the large groups of women, which in fact constitute the very spine of their existence. As one church leader commented on the role of women in the church, in the report from the decade *Churches in solidarity with women:* “If they were to leave, we would have only decision-makers and no doers.” (Living Letters 1997:34).
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