Bäckström, A., Davie G., Edgardh, N., & Pettersson, P.  

In Europe, churches are vital to welfare. This is the second of two volumes that present findings from the project Welfare and Religion in a European Perspective, based at Uppsala University. The project examined the churches’ role in delivering welfare via case studies of eight towns in England, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, Norway and Sweden. The case studies were conducted via analyses of documents, interviews with representatives of public authorities and churches, and group interviews with representatives of the general population. Although a companion volume, it can be read on its own and includes a summary of volume 1.

In Europe, it is argued in Pettersson’s chapter, the church has an established relationship with nation states. When investigating the church’s role in social welfare, the relationship between church and state — or rather, between churches and state — must be examined at the national and the local level. We find, in the northern European social democratic model, that the state takes the main responsibility for welfare (in the Nordic countries) or else commissions the churches to provide such services (in Germany). By contrast, the Catholic countries of southern Europe, and Greece (home of the Greek Orthodox church) tend to rely on the family to provide for its members: the churches ‘underline and guard the role of the family as a primary welfare agent’ (Bäckström, Davie, Edgard & Pettersson 2011: 18).

These models have a complex relationship with secularisation patterns in Europe, and the topic is duly discussed. The church is subject to what sociologists of religion call ‘functional differentiation’, where religion moves from being a ‘sacred canopy’ uniting whole populations to becoming just one among many institutions, a less popular, privatised sphere of activity. Where secularisation has occurred (as it has, differently in different places), how does this affect the church’s welfare delivery? The decline in congregations means that fewer volunteers are available to staff welfare programmes, and churches have less money to fund them. Yet the demands of increasingly marketised welfare regimes heighten rather than reduce the pressure on churches (and the voluntary or ‘third’ sector of which they are a part). For the authors, however, ‘secularisation’ might well be replaced by the term ‘religious change’, since ‘…religion is not so much disappearing as changing in its form, function and content’ (Bäckström, Davie, Edgard & Pettersson 2011: 10).

Debates about welfare work within faith communities emerge from the research: interviewees do not always agree as to whether the church should
Edgardh’s chapter highlights gender. In the eight European towns, the gendered nature of welfare work was obvious: women predominated in ‘hands-on provision of welfare services’ (Bäckström, Davie, Edgard & Pettersson 2011: 73) by churches, while men dominated decision-making. Commonly (but less so in the Nordic countries) this was seen as reflecting ‘natural’ differences between women and men. Interviewees held diverse views on gender issues. Edgardh suggests that the case studies reveal two types, or faces, of the church: the ‘church with a male face’ (hierarchically structured and male-dominated in leadership) and the ‘church with a female face’ (occupied by women focused on practical caring work, straddling the private and public spheres). Yet the male-breadwinner/unpaid female care-giver model central to Europe’s organisation of welfare is under threat, as rising female employment rates encroach on the supply of female volunteers. How should this care deficit be met? For women to leave the work force to take up caregiving is neither economically, socially nor theologically desirable, argues Edgardh. Although churches have traditionally upheld caregiving as a religious duty for women, she contends that this is not a theological imperative: ‘the churches have resources in their theological traditions for challenging these gender stereotypes’ (Bäckström, Davie, Edgard & Pettersson 2011: 104). Such resources include Jesus’s command in John 13 for his disciples to wash one another’s feet, which offers a way ‘beyond a gendered devaluing of care’ (Bäckström, Davie, Edgard & Pettersson 2011: 104). ‘Men have to become carers along with women if the welfare of present and future generations is to be secured’ (Bäckström, Davie, Edgard & Pettersson 2011: 67), she argues.

The theological discussion is continued by Ekstrand, who raises the question of Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant church teachings about welfare and how local churches interpret these teachings. There is little conflict between institutional and local levels. Local church leaders understood Christian teachings in similar ways. Many referred to the parable of the Good Samaritan and the concepts of love and justice. Ekstrand, examining church ‘operative ecclesiologies’, proposes a typology of theological visions for the church (as institution or as communion of believers) and its welfare mission (as high or low profile).

This is a fine book. Being interdisciplinary, it draws from sociology, theology, social policy and gender studies; a comprehensive approach that will make it attractive to a wide readership. Like the project, it focuses on Christianity as...