Annual Meeting Focus: Latin America

Latin American Scholarship
An Interview with Sylvia Marcos, Claremont Graduate University

Sylvia Marcos researches and writes on gender issues in ancient and contemporary Mexico. She has been awarded the H. W. Lace Visiting Professorship at Union Theological Seminary, New York City. Currently she is Visiting Professor of Mesoamerican Religions and Gender in the School of Religion at Claremont Graduate University. Her academic appointments have included teaching postgraduate-level courses in psychology and sociology of religion at Harvard University. She is a member of the editorial board of Religion, editorial advisor for Conexiones: International Review of Theology, and international editor for Gender and Society. She has served on the International Connections Committee of the American Academy of Religion and on the board of the Religious Council on Population, Reproductive Health, and Ethics. She is Secretary for International Affairs of the Permanent Board of Directors for the Asociación Latinoamericana para el Estudio de las Religiones (ALER).

In Mexico, Marcos is a research associate in Religion and Society with the Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia (ENAH). She is also a founding member of the Permanent Seminar on Gender and Anthropology with the Instituto de Antropología e Historia (UNAM). At the College de Mexico she is a member of the ongoing seminar on Reproductive Health and Society. Previous academic positions include professor of social and sexual psychology at the Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Morelos. She currently serves on the Board of Directors of the Centro de Derechos Humanos Don Sergio for indigenous women's rights.

**RSN:** Tell us something about the Latin American Association for the Study of Religions (ALER).

**Marcos:** The Asociación Latinoamericana para el Estudio de las Religiones is interested in fostering interchange among scholars of religious studies on and in Latin America. Our main focus is the religious configurations as they emerge and are reconstructed by the influences proper to the different Latin American contexts.

We are committed to interdisciplinary research. ALER fosters studies encompassing existing perspectives and methodologies: historical, ethnological, psychological, sociological, theological, and hermeneutical. We also encourage the work of recent and nonestablished scholarship, inviting participation from graduate students. Finally, there is a special category of speakers included in our congresses: “actors”—the social actors we call them. Speakers from a faith-based perspective are fruitfully mingled in our programs with rigorous academic scholarship.

We are also reaching out to the work done by Latina/o Hispanic scholars. As secretary for International Relations at ALER, I am very interested in connecting with all the fine work done by AACR's groups on Religion in Latin America and the Carribbean, and on Indigenous peoples, as well as by others whose interests intersect with ours.

**RSN:** We understand that you recently spent a semester as the first Visiting International Scholar in the Theological School at Drew University, under the sponsorship of the Hispanic Institute of Theology. Can you tell us about this experience?

**Marcos:** It was quite an extraordinary experience. The seminar is relatively small in number but great in quality. Several of the professors were known to me. I had read the works of some of them, like Catherine Keller, Virginia Burrus, and S. Moore. I had shared academic spaces with some others, like Otto Maduro (who worked out the invitation for me with the support of Dean Maxine Beach), Karen Brown, and Ada Isai Diaz. It was also extraordinary that I could really engage in conversations and dialogue with all of them. You know how scholars’ time is generally so scarce? I had the chance of being so welcome that almost everyone went out of their way to have time for these academic encounters.

I also had the fortune of meeting other faculty I had not known previously who were equally interesting and stimulating intellectually. Among them were Traci West, S. W. Arias, L. D. Karras, and especially David Grayzel. The students were very committed and focused on their doctoral work so it was a pleasure teaching them. Since my themes of gender and religion in Mesoamerica are apparently removed from their daily academically-religious life in the U.S., their unrelenting interest deserves a special mention.

By the end of the semester, when I delivered the annual Hispanic/Latino/a Theology and Religion Lecture, I had the satisfaction that all the gifted, interesting, and rigorous scholars at Drew commented on my work.

**RSN:** Can you tell us about your work at Claremont Graduate University as a visiting professor, especially your course “Gender and Religion in Mesoamerica”?

**Marcos:** At Claremont I have been teaching a semester course every year for the last 15 years. It feels like returning home. I have followed post-graduate students through their dissertations and exams, and have felt much a part of the permanent faculty. Karen Torjeen, dean of the School of Religion, is a kind of visionary. Back in 1993, she understood that my issues were a promising and much-needed perspective for religious studies. As a specialist in early Christianity, she — and other faculty with the same expertise — has also been a resource for my own growth and learning on early Christian thought. I have been especially fascinated by discovering the phenomenal women that, previous to recent feminist scholarship, had been hidden from history.

The students are also a very special lot. In the Women and Religion Program, there are frequently mature women who have had a previous successful career in the arts, and other academic fields, who are very interested in the issues. It is quite a challenge to bring all that diversity home to my “Gender in Mesoamerican Religions.” The intensive seminar I teach in the spring is usually followed by a field trip to Mexico to foster experiences with some of the issues that I discussed academically, practically and intellectually.

**RSN:** Your last book in Spanish is the third volume of the Enciclopedia iberoamericanas de Religiones, Religión y Genero (Editorial Trotta, 2004). Can you tell us about the themes that run throughout these essays? And about your previous book, Chiapas el Factor Religioso?

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Marcos: As I was telling you, I did not want to consider that "Mesoamerica" is bound by territorial limits only. I included work by notable feminist theologians living in the U.S., such as Daisy Machado, who reviews the work of Frei Aquino, A. Lidi Díaz, and other feminist theologians. It is also a volume that spans methodologies in an interdisciplinary spectrum. There are works of biblical hermeneutics, like Elias Tamez's contribution, and feminist theology, like Ivone Geisler and Rebeca Monterrogato's writings, but also sociological interpretations of gender within pre-Columbian in Brazil, like the work of Maria das Dores Machado and Cecilia Maris. An anthropological and historical analysis of the religions of Mesoamerica is included, as well as Afro-Brasilian Candomble and Afro-Cuban Santeria. It makes a fascinating read that obliges the reader to position himself/herself in diverse points of reference and to get glimpses at the immense variability of gender reconstructions within all these diverse religious traditions.

Marcos: The first book is a collection of the presentations at the panel I organized at the XVIth Congress of the IAHFR in Mexico as Adjunct Proceedings, 2000. It is a study of the ways bodies are conceptualized, regulated, and infused with religious meanings with respect to gender mandates within diverse religious traditions. I included among others, for example, work by Rita Gons on Buddhism, Nancy fallon on Hinduism, T. Suleiman's work on the use of the veil in Turkey. The volume also contains works on Philippino indigenous women healers, the "Balyanles," and other histories from the Philippines.

Implied by the selection of these articles is a comparison with the Mesoamerican epistemological and religious issues I develop in my own article. As you see, my interest has been to record as comprehensive a spectrum of beliefs and traditions as possible. Something will emerge from the sediments of that plural analysis that will make us deeply knowledgeable about gender constraints and/or privileges. How do religions construct and interpret bodies, physically, socially, culturally? These are the main questions posed by the authors.

RSN: What current trends in Latin-American scholarship interest you the most?

Marcos: I am very interested in the indigenous movements in the Americas. They are political movements that contribute to other revolutionary movements - claim religion and spirituality at their core. At several key moments, I have been involved with consulting orters for the Mexican indigenous women's movement. I speak openly of this in my forthcoming book which is also going to be published in English (Palgrave, March 2005). Indigenous movements in the Americas, as exemplified by the II Continental Indigenous Summit of the Americas (Quito, June 26-30, 2004), stressed the challenging effects of feminism and Western gender concepts on the originative populations of the Americas. The indigenous peoples claim that they have a different way of conceptualizing the gender divide.

They speak of "complementarity" and "equilibrium" as their own way of interpreting genders. It is very paradoxical.

I remember that, following these indigenous claims, I sent a project proposal to Hunter College some ten years ago. I won the competition and was named Rockefeller Humanities in Residence for the year 1990-91. However, when I presented my work widely, the feminists and gender theoreticians were reluctant to see it as a truthful rendering of alternative constructs done not from the perspective of the indigenous women. Consequently, they rejected my position. They could only think of "complementarity" within the realm of Christian traditions that fill this word with misogynist meanings. Of course, this kind of church-based interpretation of "complementarity" means that we are passive, the obedient, the silent sufferers. In this semantics of complementarity, the male is the active, leading, achieving part. There is even a recent letter from the Congregation of the Faith in the Vatican (7/31/2004) compelling women to conform to this model of behavior.

It is hard to give credit to such a backward interpretation of femininity!

But what do the indigenous peoples mean by complementarity? What I hear the indigenous women say is very different from the complementarity subscribed by the Vatican. I am working on a book to be published by Brill in the collection Religion in the Americas directed by Hector Avalos. There are a lot of misconception stemming from the inappropriate adoption of Spanish words imposed on indigenous peoples by the colonizing friars.

For instance, by calling the plato "rey," or the tostón "alma," the Spaniards imported colonizing meanings into the indigenous worlds. These "translations" were appropriate at best. So a careful interpretation of indigenous discourse - in my case of the indigenous women - reveal epistemological connections, interpretations of causalities, interconnections that have nothing to do with the semantic meanings Westerners ascribe to words. Imagine what the careful study of some basic terminology is beginning to reveal! That is my decolonizing effort and the deconstruction of capacities that I am immersed in now.

Books by Sylvia Marcos


