

Gender/Bodies/Religions
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Sylvia Marcos(editor)
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Gender/Bodies/Religions, edited by Sylvia Marcos, takes us on a tour to the world through the experiences of women linked to different religious traditions. From at least three continents, the voices and the experiences of women of different religious traditions are analyzed from various theoretical perspectives, resulting in important insights as much for feminist theory as for religious sociology and anthropology.

In this anthology Sylvia Marcos has put together works which continue the feminist-developed analysis of the body and the way in which it has been converted into an arena in dispute for the control of woman sexuality and feminine identity. Many feminist studies have questioned the existence of the body as something natural and merely biological, since our concepts of it and the concepts promoted by science and religion are framed by culture. Nevertheless, until now, most feminist studies have been centered on the analysis of the body from a Western point of view, and in many cases from the analysis of science as a discourse of power whose representations legitimate exclusions and inequality. Gender/Bodies/Religions, offers a new perspective on this debate by including analysis of discourses and religious practices which construct the female body in different cultural contexts.

However, the cultural diversity which the book embraces, while it enriches the debate, also encounters several methodological and epistemological challenges which amount to the analysis (and to a certain extent the judgement) of systems of inequality or strategies of resistance from a western academic traditional systems and strategies constructed in the frame of other cultural values and world views. The tension between the idealization of non-western societies on the part of some scholars, and the perspective of those who emphasize the oppression of non-western woman, seeing them only as victims, and denying any possibility of their being social agents, is the present in many gender studies which are carried out in non-western contexts.
Though the essays gathered in this volume do not resolve this dilemma, some of them do make (implicitly or explicitly) some methodological proposal to break free of this dichotomy. The Philippine priestesses known as Babaylan, analyzed by Fe Magahas, Milagros Guerrero, and Consolación Aras: the Mapuche healers, known as Machis, whose practices are analyzed by Ana Mariella Bacigalupo; the traditional Indian midwives or Dais, whose experiences are portrayed by Janet Chawla; the Malayan Healer or Bomoh, about whom Carol Lederman writes; or the spiritualist women described by Silvia Ortiz have found an empowering space in their ritual roles. In many cases they have confronted the genders roles established by institutional religions, and some of them, like the Mapuches and Philippine Babaylan, have even questioned the link between sexuality and gender-identity by assuming several identities, both male and female, regardless of their own sexuality. Nevertheless, all of them have encountered the limits set by the hegemonic culture or the institutional religion, which in one way or another try to place them back in the gender roles demand normal, valid, and permitted by the patriarchal ideology. The methodological challenge that gender studies of popular and institutional religions face is to be able to recognize these limits without denying the importance of the empowering spaces won by women. In my opinion, this book makes important contributions in this sense; its proposals, its limitations, and even its silences need to be taken into account in future studies of gender and religion.