

## REMEMBERING MARCELLA ALTHAUS-REID

Thia Cooper

Assistant Professor, Department of Religion  
Gustavus Adolphus College  
800 West College Avenue Saint Peter  
MN 56082 USA  
tcooper@gustavus.edu

Professor Marcella Althaus-Reid, Chair of Contextual Theology in the School of Divinity, University of Edinburgh, died in February 2009 after a prolonged illness. Author of *The Queer God* and *Indecent Theology: Theological Perversions in Sex, Gender and Politics* among many other books, Marcella worked at the intersection of several fields: liberation theology, including feminist, economic, political and queer theologies, queer theory, gender studies, politics and economics. She challenged the roots of liberation theology in their “traditional” economic and political senses and she moved feminist and queer theologies forward. Her first book *Indecent Theology* challenged the Christian tradition to engage with humanity as full sexual, economic and political beings:

Her [an Argentinean feminist theologian’s] task may be to deconstruct a moral order which is based on a heterosexual construction of reality, which organizes not only categories of approved social and divine interactions but of economic ones too. The Argentinean theologian would like then to remove her underwear to write theology with feminist honesty, not forgetting what it is to be a woman when dealing with theological and political categories. I should call such a theologian, indecent, and her reflection *Indecent Theology*.<sup>1</sup>

And so *Indecent Theology* was born. Throughout her work, she articulated Christianity as she found it in the practices of Christians around the world from the streets of Buenos Aires to the S&M clubs in Brazil, not in the halls of academia. Her work was groundbreaking and controversial.

It was a long and arduous journey to the professorial chair she held. Born and raised in Argentina, she fought to study theology at a time

1. Marcella Maria Althaus-Reid, *Indecent Theology: Sexual Perversions in Sex, Gender, and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2000), 2.

when women were not allowed. She finally secured a place at ISEDET in Buenos Aires. After achieving her PhD at the University of St. Andrews in the UK in another period of struggle, she became a lecturer in the School of Divinity at the University of Edinburgh. As her student I watched her battle against tradition as she became a Professor and Chair in Contextual Theology, the first female professor of theology there, and only the second in Scottish history.

It feels impossible to describe Marcella in a few words. I want to share a few vignettes in tribute to her life and work.

She was indecent long before she formally wrote about the theme. As a theologian she was unafraid to search for God or to describe the God she had found. She critiqued the capitalist economy, describing going to bed in Argentina with enough money to get through the next day and awakening in the morning to realize that her money would no longer buy her even one meal because of inflation. Theologically, she argued that money had come to be regarded as a “person” and that people had become mere “things,” less important than money in the economy.<sup>2</sup>

She talked of being repeatedly told that women did not go to theological seminary; she was supposed to think of studying something else. She spoke of working with the poor in Buenos Aires, welcoming the homeless into church to chat over alcohol and cigarettes. Despite the disapproval she received in both these cases (and many others), she felt church should be a welcoming place for all. She continued this consciousness-raising work in Scotland in Dundee and Perth.

In the UK she attended Quaker services. She told me once that in the pews of another church in the UK she was surprised that she was expected to remain silent, apart from formally allowed responses, while the minister did the talking and praying. She too wanted to pray and speak her mind aloud. I also remember that in meetings the wooden hand-held fan emerged when her thoughts grew tumultuous.

My most vivid memory is of sitting with her in her office looking at a photo taken of her in a church. I said I liked it and she laughed and said they had to take the picture quite quickly. The priest had realized who she was and was yelling and soon chased her out of the church. In her life and work, she struggled tirelessly for all of us who have been or have felt chased out of God’s church. She will be sorely missed but I look forward to one day sitting in God’s feminist, liberationist, queer, indecent church with her.

Thank you Marcella for being indecent and for encouraging the rest of us to be our indecent selves too.

2. Marcella Maria Althaus-Reid, “Bién Sonados? The Future of Mystical Connections in Liberation Theology,” *Political Theology* 3 (2000): 44–63 (48).