

SANTA MUERTE: THE NEW SAINT IN TOWN

An interview with Dr. R. Andrew Chesnut



Dr. Chesnut, welcome to the World Religions and Spirituality Forum.

WRSP: Reading about Santa Muerte in the media suggests that this devotionalism has just burst upon the scene. In your work you explain that veneration of Santa Muerte has a more extensive history. Could you explain?

DR. CHESNUT: Right, as a public cult, it really only goes public 12 years ago in 2001. However, we have the first recorded presence of Santa Muerte going back to the Spanish Colonia Era, more specifically in the 1790's, when, on two occasions, the Spanish Inquisition discovered indigenous groups in Central Mexico venerating a figure who they actually referred to as Santa Muerte. Interestingly, the Inquisitors go in and actually destroy the chapel that housed the figure called Saint Death, or Santa Muerte. And then Santa Muerte goes underground for the next century and a half and only resurfaces in the form of field notes of American and Mexican anthropologists in the 1940s and 1950s. There is a whole period of a century and a half where it appears we don't really have any written historical records detailing the presence of Santa Muerte.

WRSP: If Santa Muerte devotionalism has been growing rapidly in recent years, particularly in Mexico, can you describe the circumstances that have led to this

extraordinary surge of veneration?

DR. CHESNUT: Yes, well Santa Muerte goes from a figure of occult devotion to becoming the public cult that it is today. In 2001, when a humble quesadilla vendor in the notorious Mexico City barrio Tepito decides to put a life-sized effigy of Santa Muerte outside of her home as Halloween becomes All Saints Day, November 1, 2001. Her son had been released from prison early and as a gift for his mother's devotion and steadfastness in visiting him in prison, upon his release he gave her this present of a life-sized, human-sized Santa Muerte. She put it in the kitchen of her home where she sells, where she used to sell, quesadillas to neighbors and passersby. And people buying the quesadillas spontaneously started to make offerings to the Santa Muerte image that she had, and this became so overwhelming that she decided to put it outside on the sidewalk. And that's kind of the moment in which this figure that had been part of the occult in Mexico morphed into the public cult that it is today. So it's just very recently that Mexicans themselves have found out about who Santa Muerte is. In fact, I always think it's really fascinating to tell people that my parents-in-law, who live in the western state of Michoacán, and are in their 80s have found out about her through my, their gringo son-in-law's, research. They spent their entire lives in Mexico and never heard of Santa Muerte. Now, you'd be very hard-pressed to find a Mexican who has not heard of Santa Muerte, likewise for most Latin-Americans.

WRSP: Santa Muerte is often portrayed as the saint venerated by marginal groups like prostitutes and drug traffickers. However, it is frequently noted that law enforcement officials and many other ordinary Mexicans also are likely to be devotees of Santa Muerte. How can we make sense of this apparently very diverse devotee base?

DR. CHESNUT: That's really a fascinating part of the appeal, that there's no doubt that she has this disproportionate appeal to people who live on the margins in both Mexican and American society, in particularly, those people who might face death, who might feel that death is imminent. And that's going to be narco-traffickers, prostitutes, and others who earn their living out in the street. Mexico has the 9th highest homicide rate in the entire world, and in the last six years, we're now talking about 70,000 Mexicans having lost their lives during the drug

wars there. So yes, there's no doubt there's a special appeal to those groups, but her reputation as the most potent miracle worker in Mexico and in parts of the United States means her attraction goes beyond those groups. And there are middle class professionals, particularly in Mexico, who figure among her devotees. In fact, I met many such people when I was doing my research in Tepito at the historic shrine in Mexico City: lawyers and even doctors and such. So yes, there is a special appeal but because she enjoys a reputation for being such a speedy and efficacious miracle worker, she also has devotees who are more affluent as well.

WRSP: There are many other folk saints in Mexico. Do any of them draw on the same segment of the Mexican population as does Santa Muerte?

DR. CHESNUT: Oh yeah, no doubt. Probably the most important one would be Jesus Malverde, whom I believe you have written about, in the northern state of Sinaloa as the original narco-saint, but who's popularity in the last few years has become eclipsed by Santa Muerte. Juan Solado, or Soldier John, is also important, particularly in Tijuana for migrants who are crossing to the United States, a lot of them ask him for protection. But yes, in general, the other saints, the other folk saints in Mexico, and Latin America in general, appeal to the same social segment as Santa Muerte. But I think because Santa Muerte's popularity is just so tremendous, her appeal has influence beyond the more marginalized segments of Latin America, unlike many of the folk saints, who I think are mostly limited to more marginalized sectors of Mexican and Latin American societies.

WRSP: There are now numerous Santa Muerte shrines scattered across Mexico (and increasingly within the U.S.). Could you describe common features of these shrines and the acts of devotionism that take place at the shrines?

DR. CHESNUT: Most of the more public shrines are going to have an effigy or statue of Santa Muerte as a centerpiece, like the historic one in Tepito. And you will see a lot of material offerings that devotees have left for the effigy of Santa Muerte: fruit, apples, bananas, cigarettes, liquor (particularly tequila), and beer. A lot of people think that Santa Muerte, since she's a skeleton, is perpetually parched so she also tends to have a glass, or she should have a glass, of water as well. So [there are] all these kind of material offerings. And many times the offerings reflect the personal taste of devotees who are making the offerings,

who also like to smoke and to drink certain brands of tequila and to eat chocolate and such. And some of the more important shrines, particularly in Mexico City, will have monthly public services that are often called a rosary service, and they're kind of an adaptation of the Catholic rosary service, dedicated to the Virgin Mary. In fact, they substitute the name of Santa Muerte; it's pretty much identical to a Catholic rosary service. Flowers, they're really big on flowers. So you will usually see fresh floral offerings, typically roses, an interesting kind of parallel with the Virgin Mary, one of her symbols is the white rose. So you also find roses, particularly white roses at Santa Muerte shrines. And at some of them you'll also find little kind of ex-votos that are prayers or often thanks that people have written on scraps of paper. Often these are kind of folded over so the casual observer can't read them but sometimes you can read them. Those would be some of the highlights you might see at a Santa Muerte shrine, at least the public ones.

WRSP: There seem to be numerous appellations for Santa Muerte as well as an extraordinary iconography. Could you describe for us some of this diverse imagery?

DR. CHESNUT: Right, as far as appellations, she just seems to have hundreds of nicknames. Among them, the more common ones that come to mind are Skinny Lady, White Girl, the Bony Lady, the Bald Lady, Lady of the Shadows, Co-Godmother, White Sister. What's interesting is that several of these monikers or appellations for her are based on a kinship relationship. So that kind of tells you that many people approach her in a very familiar way, the way that they might their own kin.

The iconography is very interesting. If you go back to the earliest representation, it's basically a female version of the European Grim Reaper. And her most common accoutrement that you find is her scythe, for the reaping of souls, much like the Grim Reaper. And you also often see her with a balance or scale, kind of usurping the role of Archangel Michael and weighing the souls of people who've died to determine whether they go north or south in the afterlife. She often is also represented with the owl. And the owl obviously represents wisdom, but the owl in certain pre-Columbian indigenous traditions in Mexico is also associated with death as well. So [there is] kind of that dual, symbolic role for the owl. And

more lately, more in the last few years, you'll see all kinds of novel spins on her iconography as she becomes more commercialized. You know, there's the Sexy Santa Muerte with her mini-skirt, whom I've seen in Mexico City. And there's Pregnant Santa Muerte, which really seems to be a non sequitur. And there are a lot of artists, particularly Mexican-American artists, who have played with her image. One of their most novel and interesting ones that I've seen is the fusion of Santa Muerte and the Virgin of Guadalupe, (into GuadaMuerte) and that has all kinds of interesting connotations as well.

WRSP: Many Santa Muerte devotees appear to consider themselves to be faithful Catholics. How do they think about their dual religious commitments?

DR. CHESNUT: That's a difficult question, and it's true, a great majority of people, particularly in Mexico, when asked, would say that they're Catholic. And a) they don't care that the Mexican Catholic Church, and more recently the Vatican, have condemned Santa Muerte or b) others say they don't know, but it's hard to imagine now that there are devotees that haven't heard about the Vatican condemnation. But yes, it's clear in my recent research that most of them kind of see Santa Muerte as a complementary part of their own kind of formal, folk-Catholicism. And while you and I as academic observers of this might be able to point out certain contradictions in devotion to Santa Muerte, just as the Catholic Church has, I don't think that they necessarily care or see these contradictions.

WRSP: What stance has the Roman Catholic Church taken with respect to Santa Muerte devotionism?

DR. CHESNUT: The Mexican Catholic Church was pretty quick to condemn her cult early. 2003/2004 had various announcements by Mexican bishops, denouncing her essentially as a form of Satanism. And more dramatically, most recently of course, is the Vatican denunciation by the President of the Pontifical Council for Culture, one of the top men at the Vatican. Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, last month was in Mexico on a four-day tour to engage in his pet project that is called the Courtyard of the Gentiles, which essentially is designed to engage nonbelievers. But his Courtyard in Mexico really turned into a kind of anti-Santa Muerte tour. Within the four days, on three separate occasions, he condemned Santa Muerte;

the language he used was “blasphemous” and that it’s “false religion”, mostly of narco-traffickers and such. And so you can imagine, it’s not every day that the Vatican is denouncing folk saints in Latin America. So she goes from unknown to the great majority of Mexicans just twelve years ago, to now on the Vatican watch-list in just twelve years. It’s simply extraordinary.

WRSP: What stance have law enforcement agencies in Mexico and the U.S. taken with respect to Santa Muerte devotionism?

DR. CHESNUT: Here in the United States, she basically has been branded as a narco-saint and I think there are several states in the South West that are close to Mexico, that they’re really even starting to use Santa Muerte as probable cause for even arresting somebody on suspicion of having narcotics. Yeah, it’s kind of a very black-and-white view of her here. And that’s the official view of her also in Mexico. That’s what really got me interested in starting my research in 2009, when the Mexican army came. They were sent in March of 2009 to the Texas-Mexico and California-Mexico border to bulldoze some 40 Santa Muerte shrines as former President Felipe Calderon identified Santa Muerte basically as a spiritual patron of many drug cartels in Mexico. So also the official line in Mexico is that she’s a narco-saint. But one of the major points I try to make in my book, *Devoted to Death*, is that it’s much more complicated because she also has lots of devotees among law enforcement in Mexico, at all levels. And she is really popular not only among prisoners in Mexico, but among prison guards and the whole penal system as well, and this is something that you would never guess reading the popular press on either side of the border. So, the official line by law enforcement is on the same page as the United States. But the reality is that among agents of law enforcement in Mexico, there’s a fair amount of devotees as well.

WRSP: You have reported that Santa Muerte devotionism has crossed the U.S.-Mexican border and has been growing in the United States. What do you see as the potential for Santa Muerte devotionism in the U.S.?

DR. CHESNUT: I think there’s lots of potential for growth. And again, let me just reflect on the amazing rapidity of her growth. It’s been only a decade, if that, in the United States and now we can easily find her here in Richmond, Virginia,

where the Latino population is only about 6 or 7 percent. I've got a colleague at a college in a small town in Tennessee, where the population is 30,000 and their Latino population doesn't exceed 1 percent, and just the other day she bought a Santa Muerte votive candle at one of the shops in her town. So she's pretty much everywhere today in the United States, again, in just ten years. And one of the newest trends is that, more and more, I'm finding not only non-Mexican devotees, but non-Latin American devotees, i.e. devotees who are both Euro and African American. So I think she's showing that she has this ability to transcend her Mexican and Latin American origin. And so there's a fair amount of neo-Pagans here in the U.S., Euro-American neo-Pagans, who are becoming interested in her and venerating her as well. So, I think there's a lot of chance for growth and I think, if anything, in a kind of counter-productive way, the Vatican condemnation will probably just contribute to further growth among some folks.

WRSP: The media is well known for a tendency to treat subjects such as Santa Muerte in a sensationalistic manner. From your experience in doing a great number of media interviews, is the media playing a constructive educational role in its coverage of Santa Muerte?

DR. CHESNUT: In general, the commercial mass media is not playing a constructive role because the commercial, mainstream media is mostly looking to have larger audiences and so they have kind of an incentive to play up whatever is sensational and obviously it's easy to do that with Santa Muerte's link to narco-crime and everything. But I will say, maybe in the last six months or so, there has been a good trend in which there have been some national-level stories that are more nuanced. And even a recent AP (Associated Press) story, a national story that came out in March, was much more nuanced and balanced and talked about her. Yes she is a narco saint, but she's a lot more. And so, I think there is a trend with certain elements of the press in being interested. And in fact there's a recent ABC-Univision collaboration entitled, *Santa Muerte: Not Just for Narcos Anymore*, but of course she was never just for narcos. But yes, I think that over the last half-year or so there's been some good development toward more nuanced reporting on her. But yes, for the last ten years, most of it has been just hammering away at her role as a narco saint.

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Dr. R. Andrew Chesnut holds the Bishop Walter F. Sullivan Chair in Catholic Studies in the Religious Studies Program at Virginia Commonwealth University. He has spent over four years researching the mysterious and frequently misunderstood folk saint, Santa Muerte. Professor Chesnut is author of the groundbreaking book, *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint* (Oxford, 2012). He is also the author of *Competitive Spirits: Latin America's New Religious Economy* (Oxford, 2003) and *Born Again in Brazil: The Pentecostal Boom and the Pathogens of Poverty* (Rutgers, 1997).

