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Devoted to Death: Santa Muerta, the Skeleton Saint
R. Andrew Chesnut
Oxford University Press, 2012. 232 pp.

Devoted to Death tells the story of the Mexican “folk saint” Santa Muerte, the “Skeleton Saint” of unknown origin who has amassed millions of followers, both in Mexico and abroad. Author, R. Andrew Chesnut, serves as the Bishop Walter F. Sullivan Chair in Catholic Studies and Professor of Religious Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University. This is his third book, following *Competitive Spirits: Latin America’s New Religious Economy* (2003), and *Born Again in Brazil: The Pentecostal Boom and the Pathogens of Poverty* (1997).

Chesnut was self-professedly “summoned” by the “Bony Lady” (one of the numerous aliases attached to Santa Muerte) to “contemplate her” and in so doing he attempts to answer an intriguing question for himself: Following the bulldozing of a number of Santa Muerte shrines along the borders between Mexico and both California and Texas at the behest of the Mexican government, Chesnut wondered, “What on earth had Saint Death done...to deserve such an aggressive desecration of her holy sites at the hands of the Mexican government?” (4). It is this question that inspires Chesnut’s research and frames much of his argumentation throughout the text, which focuses largely on exploring depictions of Sante Muerte as a threatening devotional figure.

Each chapter in the book focuses on particularly colored candles that individually represent a specific sort of devotion for adherents to the “cult,” ultimately culminating in the seven-color “rainbow” candle. This multicolored candle, Chesnut argues, embodies the “multihued identity” of Santa Muerte. Chesnut is concerned not only with the numerous ways in which devotees interact with this saint, he also wishes to illustrate how she became such a public figure, or “why devotion to [her] has transformed from an occult practice, unknown to most Mexicans, to a burgeoning public cult,” whose popularity surpasses even that of the Virgin of Guadalupe (4).

Chesnut’s *Santa Muerte* is not only relevant to scholars of religion; the personal narrative, colorful descriptive language, and humorous anecdotes throughout the text make it approachable to a general public readership. Its appeal for religious studies scholars rests largely on its unique subject material as well as the apparent nascence of examinations of this saint within

contemporary studies. Indeed, as Chesnut notes, Santa Muerte was “underground” or “in hiding” for a substantial length of time, at which point devotions to the saint were less explicitly carried out than in present times. Since this period of hiding, both Mexican and American researchers have begun to discuss her in more sophisticated ways (190). However, according to Chesnut, additional study and assessment is needed to achieve a nuanced understanding of adherents’ notions of Santa Muerte’s varied and complex character.

Chesnut’s work provides a contemporary account of the saint and expands the reader’s understanding of her, including the context surrounding her popularity, which he argues “eclipses every other saint in Mexico except Saint Jude” (4). Chesnut expounds upon this bold assertion regarding the immense popularity of this saint throughout his text. His expansive examination is interdisciplinary, involving diverse topics and methodologies. As such, this book has much to offer to scholarship in a variety of disciplines, such as Mexican anthropology, American anthropology, cultural studies, and sociology, among others.

Throughout the carefully arranged chapters, Chesnut’s extensive research illustrates well the variety of characteristics and abilities worshippers attribute to the saint. He discusses a range of types of devotions to Santa Muerte. Often the rituals that devotees perform for the saint involve the use of one or more of the colored candles of Chesnut’s chapters, as each candle is intentionally chosen for its individual, symbolic properties. Chapter one, or the Brown Candle, refers to “matters of enlightenment, discernment, and wisdom” (20). Providing a historical background of Santa Muerte and her cult, Chesnut explains that while the saint’s precise origins are uncertain, he offers a few potential explanatory histories. Chapter two, the White Candle, is devoted to beliefs and ritual practices of the devotees of the saint, discussing a range of personal preferences and traits attributed to the saint such as dress, nationality, and even food, drink, and narcotic preferences. Chapter three, the Black Candle, refers to appeals made by adherents for protection and harm. Chesnut explains that these aspects of worship are those most commonly emphasized within media portrayals, particularly within Mexican tabloid magazines, newspapers, and fictionalized accounts in films, and are often associated with drug-related crimes. Chapter four, the Red Candle, discusses the devotions regarding matters of love. This refers back to the first chapter’s proposal that the saint may have originally evolved as a sort of “love sorceress” (33). Chesnut argues that Santa Muerte has maintained this role and is

perceived by devotees as a “love doctor” or “bounty hunter of wayward men” (121). Chapter five’s Gold Candle represents prosperity and abundance. This chapter describes some of the ways that the saint is situated within popular culture, particularly her economic value symbolically embodied within material representations, and appeals for financial gain by devotees. Chapter six’s Purple Candle emphasizes pleas made to Santa Muerte for healing. In this chapter, Chesnut illustrates the complex ways that adherents employ curative devotions. For instance, many might petition the saint for assistance with substance abuse. This represents yet another distinct characteristic of the saint’s wide range of capabilities. The final chapter, the Green Candle, discusses Santa Muerte’s symbolic link with social justice. The justice provided by this “supernatural attorney” is, at times, paradoxically neither impartial nor fair, as requests for justice would often benefit one individual or group over another.

The fact that devotion to Santa Muerte involves a variety of appeals is one of Chesnut’s central points. He argues that her greatest attraction is her human-like ambivalence; her characteristic ability to embody, in so many multifaceted ways, the traits and characteristics of her followers. Adherents are attracted to her because she represents a powerful embodiment of a multitude of experiences and qualities which people must negotiate throughout life. She represents a lived religion and thus symbolizes that which matters most to her followers.

One notable critique is that at particular times throughout the book, Chesnut makes rather sweeping, generalized assertions that seem to lack the proper evidentiary support. For instance, while describing the different roles of “death” in the United States, in contrast to Mexico, he argues that “death has no role to play in the American Dream but that of spoiler. To be sure, we Americans are as mortal as everyone else, but in few cultures is there such a concerted cultural effort to marginalize and sanitize death” (53). This argument seemingly narrows the boundaries of “American” nationality to only those of European descent. It also oversimplifies countless cultural-religious responses to death, both in the United States and Mexico. Furthermore, after having seen devotional items of Santa Muerte in his hometown of Richmond, Virginia, Chesnut concludes: “The presence of the Bony Lady in a medium-size city with a tiny Latin American immigrant population means that her cult is widespread in this country” (191). While the topic of American devotees is relatively minor throughout the text, the contention that it is prevalent is problematic, requiring more substantive investigation

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Devoted to Death is an illuminating account of a lively, vibrant, multihued personification of death in Santa Muerte. Chesnut's text offers a unique and very personal portrait of Mexican culture. Not only does the reader gain insight into the beliefs and practices surrounding this multi-faceted folk saint, they are also presented with a much broader contextual picture, one that incorporates colonial history, contemporary Mexican politics, drug crimes, and the influence of the Catholic Church. Through Chesnut's extensive personal interactions within both Mexican and American borders, the reader is offered a sense of the full spectrum of Santa Muerte, and acquire a broad picture of how the Bony Lady is realistically understood by her diverse devotees.

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