



Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint

By R. Andrew Chesnut

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R. Andrew Chesnut offers a fascinating portrayal of Santa Muerte, a skeleton saint whose cult has attracted millions of devotees over the past decade. Although condemned by mainstream churches, this folk saint's supernatural powers appeal to millions of Latin Americans and immigrants in the U.S. Devotees believe the Bony Lady (as she is affectionately called) to be the fastest and most effective miracle worker, and as such, her statuettes and paraphernalia now outsell those of the Virgin of Guadalupe and Saint Jude, two other giants of Mexican religiosity. In particular, Chesnut shows Santa Muerte has become the patron saint of drug traffickers, playing an important role as protector of peddlers of crystal meth and marijuana; DEA agents and Mexican police often find her altars in the safe houses of drug smugglers. Yet Saint Death plays other important roles: she is a supernatural healer, love doctor, money-maker, lawyer, and angel of death. She has become without doubt one of the most popular and powerful saints on both the Mexican and American religious landscapes.

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Editorial Review

Review

"*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... 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." --*Journal of Religion and Culture*

"Vividly written and cleverly organized, this wonderful book provides the most comprehensive and balanced account of Mexican and American devotion to this controversial folk saint." --Thomas A. Tweed, author of *America's Church: The National Shrine and Catholic Presence in the Nation's Capital*

"Chesnut provides a much-needed analysis of the meteoric rise in devotion to La Santa Muerte, the saint of death whose appeal has attracted the attention of immigrants, jilted lovers, journalists, drug dealers, clergy, the infirmed, and a host of needy petitioners. This first book-length study of the devotion will be a foundational reference point for future researchers as the Santa Muerte phenomenon continues to evolve." --Timothy Matovina, author of *Latino Catholicism: Transformation in America's Largest Church*

"...intelligent, responsible, and sympathetic (although not uncritical) account of a significant and rising movement." --*Books & Culture*

"Chesnut's book is readable and accessible. Like one of the Santa Muerte-inspired films the author describes--indeed, like the kidnapper and murderer who first brought Saint Death into the public eye-- *Devoted to Death* is engrossing in a pulp fiction kind of way." --*Wilson Quarterly*

"This chatty, anecdotal work provides a basic introduction to the rapidly expanding cult of the Mexican folk saint Santa Muerte...Recommended>"--*CHOICE*

"*Devoted to Death* is fascinating, and a continuous revelation. The Skinny Lady may look sinister, and she's certainly not to be trifled with, but something about her is terribly human. As demigods go, she is the salt of the earth. Devotees feel a special intimacy with her because she is, as one of them told Chesnut, 'an old battle-axe, like us.' She also has appetites. Lighting a candle will get her attention, but she gets thirsty, and

while water is acceptable, she prefers something stronger. She enjoys tobacco, but won't turn down marijuana." --*Inside Higher Ed*

"Andrew Chesnut's comprehensive survey of Mexican folk saint Santa Muerte is a detailed and highly entertaining read. Organized by the colors symbolizing her various powers, the book neatly encapsulates the themes significant to devotees. As a researcher with a keen interest in vernacular religion and folk saints in particular, I found this book strongly appealing and an informative, engaging text...an excellent companion to Graziano's *Cultures of Devotion* and a very relevant read for scholars and students interested in Mexican druglore, faith healing, and vernacular religion." --*Journal of Folklore Research*

"Andrew Chesnut offers a comprehensive view of the cult to Saint Death, also known as the White Sister or the White Girl. ... *Devoted to Death* unpacks the meaning and origin of Saint Death's following. ... Consequently, anthropologists, sociologists of religion, criminologists, and immigration scholars would all benefit from reading *Devoted to Death* to get a full understanding of the breadth of Santa Muerte's cult."

--*Contemporary Sociology*

"Chestnut contributes the first book-length study of Santa Muerte, Mexico's skeletal patroness of death... No doubt, this initial study has set the bar high for more research even while providing a book that is accessible to students and readers of all levels." --*Religious Studies Review*

About the Author

R. Andrew Chesnut is Bishop Walter F. Sullivan Chair in Catholic Studies and Professor of Religious Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University. He is the author of *Competitive Spirits: Latin America's New Religious Economy* (OUP, 2003) and *Born Again in Brazil: The Pentecostal Boom and the Pathogens of Poverty* (1997).

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