

Santa Muerte: The Skeleton Folk-Saint of Families, Protection, and the Inevitable

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to analyze the practices of individuals in the Santa Muerte cult, and the reasoning for Catholics to turn from traditional forms of worship that are contradicted by this movement, and the possible implications surrounding this form of veneration deemed macabre and sometimes violent by the press. This research explores the rise of this relatively new syncretic practice, and its international spread as the cult has been documented from its origins in Mexico City, to the United States, and now into many other countries. Within this research, a review of the scholarly literature analyzes several aspects of this religious belief system, including possible origins of Santa Muerte's syncretic postcolonial emergence, socioeconomic factors such as poverty, tools and ritual practices for veneration, and some of the culturally unaffiliated representations of the folk-saint. Mainstream media sensationalism has decontextualized the figure and her movement to the point of misrepresentation and, therefore, it is important to analyze the folk-saint's portrayal through that medium. Through the content analysis of Eva Aridjis' film 'La Santa Muerte' (2007) the focus will be surrounding the aspects familial representation, materiality and the agency associated with belief, and the element of protection this folk-saint is believed to offer. This research is significant not only for anthropological comparisons, but also potentially for the clergy and state agencies alike to aid in their understanding of what has caused this shift from people's understanding of Catholic tradition, and the expected and unexpected outcomes and implications of this emerging syncretic religion.