Santa Muerte Returning Death to its Roots

Ben Weinberg

Drake University

Comparative Religion

Dr. Tim Knepper

December 17, 2015

**Introduction**

The cult of Santa Muerte is a growing branch of Mexican Catholicism in Mexico and America today. It has become an extremely powerful force that has garnered support from everyone from drug dealers, to lesbians, and single mothers. As Mexico becomes more dangerous and death becomes a possibility in the day to day life of Mexicans, praying to the Saint of Death seems odd. However, with closer examination, Santa Muerte as death is actually what brings the most control to her practitioners. I will begin by outlining Peter Berger’s philosophy of religion before discussing the changes that have taken place in Mexico since the introduction of modernity. Next, I will examine the roots of the concept of death in Mexico as well as the concept of death within Aztec religion. I will continue by laying out Mexican Catholicism’s adaptability and finally discuss the origin and power of the cult of Santa Muerte. By tracing the religious history of Mexico and its changing concept of death under Berger’s framework of philosophy of religion, I will argue that Santa Muerte as the concept of both life and death is a return to Mexico’s Aztec roots.

**Berger’s philosophy on religion**

Berger provides a philosophy of religion that I will use to frame Santa Muerte’s importance in the lives of Mexican people today. Berger articulates the way in which man[[1]](#footnote-1) makes meaning and that meaning making is relevant to the needs of Santa Muerte practitioners. Berger starts his first chapter with the explanation of how man and society are intertwined. It is man who creates the world and society while then the world and society change the way in which man lives. Berger’s explanation of man’s world-building leads to a discussion on nomos, or the order of things. He explains, “The socially constructed world is, above all, an ordering of experience. A meaningful order, or nomos, is imposed upon the discrete experiences and meanings of individuals” (Berger, 1969, p. 19). It is then social interaction that is meant to reproduce nomos and follow the order of things. The social world is structured based on the order and meaning. Berger (1969) continues, “Society is the guardian of order and meaning not only objectively, in its institutional structures, but subjectively as well, in its structuring of individual consciousness” (p. 21). Individuals are socialized to understand, follow, and be drawn to nomos. A separation from that social world of order and meaning is termed anomy by Berger. Anomy is a threat to the individual’s sense of the ordered world. Man, then, clings to nomos and strives to return the world to order. Berger (1969) says, “The most important function of society is nomization” (p. 22). Religion, then, acts as both an explanation of and combatant to anomy and chaos. It is through theodicy that man can see anomy and chaos within the light of nomos; that the powerful, sacred cosmos intends for what may seem like disorder. Man strives for religion that will stabilize and return order to his life. Religion can act as a way to regain control of the world when it seems like it is moving away from the meaningful order in which man is socialized to perceive the world to be. Throughout the rest of this paper I will return to the framework set by Berger to explain the way in which anomy infiltrated the lives of Mexican people and forced them to search for a way to explain it and control it.

**Social and economic chaos in Mexico**

For Mexico, anomy has come with modernity. It is the way in which modernity has been placed upon the people of Mexico that they have been forced to come face to face with disorder. Modernity, as defined by Sanchez (2013) as “a market-driven, future-oriented, existential-political condition grounded in market capitalism and industrial production” was an enormous change for the Mexican state and its people (p. 171). The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was a big turning point for Mexico’s pathway to globalization and modernity. Clouded by the neoliberal sentiments from United States and Mexico’s increased debt to the US, the government perceived that NAFTA was a necessary step forward for the Mexican people. In reality, NAFTA had a drastic effect on the livelihood of the people of Mexico. While NAFTA was credited with reviving Mexico’s economy, it was a source of increased anomy for especially the indigenous populations in Mexico. On an individual level, NAFTA took land that had been promised to be communal for the Mexican people by making a constitutional amendment to privatize it. People lost land and their very livelihood. Corn had been an incredibly important part of indigenous people’s lives and culture, however the privatization of land took corn production away from everyday farmers and into corporate hands. For hundreds of years corn had provided order to many Mexican people and NAFTA and the introduction of modernity brought chaos to these people (Gutierrez, 2015).

Outside of indigenous populations and looking more generally at the Mexican people, the rise of modernity still had profound negative effects on the everyday person. The changes that have taken place within Mexico have clearly changed the economic situations of many in the country. Franco (2004) articulates, “The signing of the NAFTA treaty…ushered in a period of neoliberal reform, dividing the nation between those who benefited and those who suffered” (p. 214). Poor and working class Mexicans were forced out of work and forced into illicit participation in drug cartels and violence that changed the course of much of the Mexican people’s livelihoods. The changes over the last twenty to thirty years, where Mexico has been faced with modernity and vast economic changes demonstrate how nomos has been disrupted within the country. As Berger described, it is then an opportunity for religion to bring order and meaning to what seems chaotic. In the case of many Mexicans, it was the idea of death in particular that brought them back to a feeling of nomos.

**The concept of death in Mexico**

In order to gain an understanding of how death can combat chaos and return nomos to the Mexican people, one must understand where death has existed within the Mexican consciousness. Sanchez spends a great deal of time and energy explaining the Mexican view of death as a historical attitude. For Mexicans, “death is happening in the now, codified in the social space as an ‘everyday,’ ‘familiar,’ presence” (Sanchez, 2013, p. 169). He goes so far as even to say that “death, or the idea of death, occupies a privileged position in the Mexican national consciousness as a symbol of national identity” (Sanchez, 2013, p. 180). It is clear then that death exists for Mexicans as a part of their nomos. Life is ordered with the concept of death coexisting with it. It is not out of the ordinary for individuals to feel the connection to death through life and it provides a feeling of order in that way.

Modernity, just as it created anomy in the economic and social parts of Mexicans lives, also had an effect on the way death was viewed. Modernity, as the forward thinking concept that it is, rather than seeing death as something present, sees death as something to come. It is, as Sanchez (2013) describes, “an anticipated encounter” (p. 171). For European and American society, steeped in modernity, death becomes something to fear. It is a future that is unclear and acts as a stop to existence. Even Berger expresses death’s place within the modern concept as an unknown. He says, “Death presents society with a formidable problem not only because of its obvious threat to the continuity of human relationships, but because it threatens the basic assumptions of order on which society rests” (Berger, 1969, p. 23). In terms of modernity, death may seem like anomy something that requires theodicy to explain. However, for Mexicans “it is not the end of life, it is not nothingness, neither is it the absolute impossibility of a future experience; rather, it is what is nearest, what is most intimate in the human quest for meaning and significance” (Sanchez, 2013, p. 183). Death itself as a part of the quest for meaning shows itself as a way towards nomos. It is the place in which a person can regain order in their lives.

That is not to say though that the Mexican concept of death has not been infiltrated in some ways with the presence of modernity in Mexico. In reality, modernity has caused a change in perception of death. Sanchez explains the double bind that Mexico has found itself in that limits its ability to nestle itself safely within neither the common Mexico view of death nor the modern European and American one. The double bind is either that Mexico assimilates, losing its originality, or remains marginalized, losing its legitimacy. So, the Mexican view of death has been stuck and without generally adopting either view of death, there is no creation of nomos either. The concept of death then exists in a middle ground where it is neither nomos nor anomy. However, death itself has found itself in modernity as anomy.

Due to the way in which modernity has changed the Mexican way of life, death has become much more physically present in the lives of Mexicans more than it ever has before. Bastante and Dickieson (2013) explain it, “The lures and dangers of *narco-*culture, the violence among competing youth gangs, the haunting realities of an economy in collapse, and the gravelly fight to survive…Mexicans face the reality of death on a daily basis” (p. 435). In that way then, death becomes anomy. It becomes something that, because the concept of death now exists in a middle ground of nothingness, disrupts order. Modernity has allowed death to be reshaped as something that does stop forward progress. The way to combat the anomy then is to find a way to explain it or find a way to return to the Mexican concept when death was something that didn’t disrupt but rather just existed. In order to do that, Mexican’s looked to religion.

**Death in the Aztec past**

The Mexican conception of death prior to modernity can be traced back to Aztec religion. It is there that death was seen as a reality equivalent and coexisting with life. It is in the foundation of the main goddesses of the Aztec faith that duality is seen. Coatlicueis one of the main goddesses of Aztec mythology. Anzaldua (1999) explains her being, “Coatlicueis the mountain, the Earth Mother who conceived all celestial beings out of her cavernous womb. Goddess of birth and death, Coatlicue gives and takes away life; she is the incarnation of cosmic processes” (p. 68). Coatlicue’sduality is clear. She is both in charge of birth and death, giving and taking life. It is through one goddess, one Earth Mother, that life and death are bound together. They exist as one, neither good nor bad, and so death does not exist as anomy but rather a part of the nomos created by the Aztec religion. Anzaldua (1999) continues, “Coatlicue depicts the contradictory. In her figure, all the symbols important to the religion and philosophy of the Aztecs are integrated…She is a symbol of the fusion of opposites: the eagle and the serpent, heaven and the underworld, life and death, mobility and immobility, beauty and horror” (p. 69). Her duality is present and exists as theodicy that explains how anomy is only a perception and in reality exists within nomos.

Along with Coatlicue, the underworld existed as a place of neutrality, neither good nor bad. In Aztec the underworld, Mictlan, was overseen by Mictlantecuhtli and Mictecacihuatle a married couple and both gods. The underworld was for all individuals who died of natural causes and there was no differentiation between people there. The only differentiation existed in individuals who died on the battlefield or were part of a sacrifice to the gods. Those individuals enjoyed their afterlife in the heavens (Bastante & Dickieson, 2013). However, for the most part, death was just death – “a continuation of this life in another realm” (Bastante & Dickieson, 2013, p. 446). Within the realm of the underworld, Mictlantecuhtli and Mictecacihuatle, both represented as skeletons or at least with a skull as a head, still were involved with earthly causes. They existed, like Coatlicue, as a supernatural connection between life and death in pre-Hispanic Mexico (Chestnut, 2012). It is with this understanding of the Aztec faith that one can see the correlation between the Mexican view of death and its struggle with modernity. However, there is not such a sharp divide between pre-Hispanic Mexico and modern Mexico. In fact, Mexico’s colonization and the introduction of Catholicism did not fully eliminate Aztec beliefs and practices. Rather, Catholicism in early Mexico adapted to ensure that, at least in some ways, conversion would take place.

**Catholic colonization and adaptability**

Catholicism’s arrival to Mexico or New Spain, obviously brought a new set of ideas and religious perspectives to the region. As happens in colonial pursuits, missionaries arrived with colonizers to spread Catholicism through the country. When the Church arrived in Mexico, the missionaries did what they could to get conversions. Granziera (2004) describes what happened early on, “When Christianity spread to the New World, its early missionaries soon discovered that it was far easier not to eliminate entirely all the customs and rites of the pagan religions they were attempting to supplant, but rather to take over and adopt those which were not incompatible with their own faith” (p. 264). The spread of Catholicism in Mexico in the sixteenth century in particular however has not garnered a great deal of in depth research until recently. Pardo (2004) explains, “Historians have either largely ignored the implications or approached it with suspicion, as if acknowledging the awareness that the church has historically shown of its need and capacity to adapt might somewhat inhibit further inquiry on how this process has taken place (p. 16). Either way, whether it has been studied or not, it is reality that early colonization involved a great deal of adaptation.

One particular part of adaptation that came to Mexico from European Catholicism, was the institution of the mayordomia, “a religious brotherhood composed almost entirely of lay believers responsible for the care of saints and burial of the dead” (Hughes, 2012, p. 9). This brotherhood in Mexico had independence outside of the official Church and were able to further adapt to the indigenous beliefs that they had held close prior to colonization. Hughes (2009) furthers, “Majordomias could assess the validity of novel practices and then adopt, introduce and sanction new rituals and customs. Similarly, new mayordomias could be created for the care of newly introduced images” (p. 9). This religious brotherhood can be seen as a part of Catholicism outside of the authority of the church itself that allowed a great deal of the adaptation witnessed today.

Mexican Catholicism today remains a malleable religion, stemming from its first introduction to Mexico. Although in the eighteenth century, church leaders tried to realign the faith with its orthodox roots, they were largely unsuccessful because of the widespread differences that had come earlier. Officials frowned upon the Aztec practices that were still performed under the name of Catholicism, but there was not much they could do (O’Hara, 2012). The initial contact between Catholicism and Mexico made the malleable quality of the religion a main part of Mexican Catholicism. Hughes (2012) describes that “Mexican Catholicism is marked by a spirt of dynamic innovation” (p. 8) even going so far as to say that “it is possible that there is at least as much religious diversity and innovation within Roman Catholicism [in Mexico] as there is outside of it” (p. 7). The malleability of Catholicism from its inception in Mexico until now, makes room for cults such as the cult of Santa Muerte to enter into the consciousness of Mexican Catholics. When modernity made Mexican life more complex and brought issues of anomy to the Mexican people the response was an adaptation of Catholicism centered on the Saint of Death.

**Origin of Santa Muerte**

The current relevance and practicality of Santa Muerte for its followers is widely agreed upon however the origins of the cult certainly is not. In the examination of the origin of the White Girl, one makes note of the clear hybridity of the cult of Santa Muerte. Some say the Saint of Death originated from European Catholic teachings and other say she comes from the Aztec goddesses. The argument for the Bony Girl’s origin in European Catholicism is in the way that Spanish missionaries brought stories of the Grim Reaper and La Parca. Chestnut demonstrates the way in which the Spanish clergy used indigenous beliefs to further their own ends, just as Granziera had explained. The introduction of these skeletal figures in Catholicism made groups such as the Maya and the Guarani adopt the new images as their own having drawn on their own sacred view of bones and skeletal figures (Chestnut, 2012). In this way, although some would like to award credit to Catholicism for indigenous groups adopting those beliefs, they would not have done so with such fervor had they not aligned with their own traditional beliefs and practices. The same, I contend, is the case with Santa Muerte. Although Santa Muerte may resemble La Parca, as a feminine skeletal figure, and she first appeared in the 1790s as the Saint of Death, her real origin exists in Aztec mythology with Coatlicue and Mictecacihuatle (the female ruler of the underworld). Although practice had been underground for hundreds of years, it is Santa Muerte’s reappearance that deserves the most attention. It is how and why people began flocking to her shrines that truly speaks to her origins and the power of her status as Saint Death.

**The Power of Santa Muerte**

The way in which individuals have been drawn to Santa Muerte is directly correlated to the way Berger views nomos and anomy. It is in the times where individuals are out of control that they are most drawn to a figure that has put order back into the lives of its practitioners, order especially on the concept of death. As has been addressed, modernity influenced a great deal in the lives of the Mexican people, everything from economically, socially, and religiously. Especially in the view of death, Mexicans found themselves in a double bind where they could no longer see death as a part of the nomos as they had for so many years. Death, then, as a reality became anomy in their lives. They did not have the same control or consciousness of death that they had had prior to neoliberalism and modernity entering in their lives. That control and consciousness of death had been a part of Mexican life for hundreds of years, based initially off of their religious, Aztec roots. Coatlicue was a dualistic goddess who was both the keeper of life and death which made clear that they both coexist. Coatlicue founded the Mexican control and consciousness of death and until the concept of death as a fearful future arrived in Mexico it stayed that way. Even throughout the conversion to Catholicism, the Aztec view of death became a Mexican view of death. However the double bind, as a response to modernity, changed that.

Mexican people began to be faced with the fear of death. The chaos surrounding them was not being dealt with and explained well enough by the Catholic Church for a number of practitioners. Bastante and Dickieson (2013) articulate this, “Amidst drug-violence instability the once strong and influential Mexican Catholic Church has been losing credibility, support, and members” (p. 436). Mexican people needed a new way of contextualizing anomy within the cosmic whole. Or, the Mexican people didn’t need a new way at all but rather just needed to reintroduce their old way of thinking. When it came to death, Mexicans had control and consciousness of it, based off of Coatlicue, a dualistic image of both life and death that they worshiped. They returned to that kind of dualistic image of worship with Santa Muerte.

As I had mentioned before, the origin itself is not as important as the implications of Santa Muerte’s rise to popularity. The image of Santa Muerte could have been based off of La Parca of European Catholicism or Mictecacihuatle of the Aztec underworld. The image itself is not as important as what Santa Muerte accomplishes. The concept itself is a reintroduction of Coatlicue and the way Santa Muerte is able to create theodicy for the Mexican people to bring order back to the chaos caused by modernity is from the Aztec tradition.

In the same way that Coatlicue was an ambiguous goddess, so too is the White Lady an ambiguous Saint. Bastante and Dickieson (2013) explain, “The fluidity and diversity of names and designations demonstrates both ambivalence and ambiguity in Santa Muerte’s identity. She is light and darkness, power and weakness, majesty and humility” (p.437-438). This kind of explanation of Santa Muerte is almost an exact replica of how Anzaldua articulated who Coatlicue was. The kind of interconnectedness that existed for Mexicans with the Aztec face in the duality of Coatlicue exists here too with Santa Muerte. In Santa Muerte’s ability to give life to her practitioners as well as have the power to take life harkens back to the concept of death’s presence, a concept that provided order to the Mexican people. Bastante and Dickieson (2013) call it “a twist of sacred irony” that Mexicans would pray for safety to the Saint of Death but based on the history of the Mexican people and their faith, it makes perfect sense.

Santa Muerte does so much more too. The Bony Lady is believed to bring about economic prosperity, justice to scorned lovers, safety of narcotics, divine healer, and much more (Chestnut, 2012). As death, Santa Muerte gives practitioners once again control over the inevitable with the reintroduction of a past concept, but as the powerful saint that she is, Santa Muerte can lessen the chaos of life in so many other ways. As anomy grows, Santa Muerte has proven herself to help her practitioners and return order to their lives. Bastante and Dickieson (2013) again explain this, “A key feature of Mexico’s chaotic social context is the growing social danger of economic collapse, and Santa Muerte responds by promising economic stability and by providing financial help or even jobs” (p. 459). This kind of work by a saint clearly shows why she would be followed by so many during a time in Mexico where the challenges seem unavoidable. Help from the supernatural seems necessary and when the Catholic Church is not succeeding in helping an individual succeed, the Church’s malleability may and the cult Saint of Death becomes the answer.

**Conclusion**

Through my examination of Mexico and the intersectionality of history, religion, and death I have shown the conceptual origins of the cult of Santa Muerte. Using Berger’s framework, it is clear how Santa Muerte returns order to the concept of death by returning to its earliest beginnings. Santa Muerte is a hybrid of faiths, remaining essentially Catholic in practice but having been grown from the seeds of Aztec faith. The cult of Santa Muerte still remains full of secrets, however its power and popularity cannot be denied.

References

Anzaldua, G. (1999). *Borderlands/La Frontera* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Aunt Lute Books.

Bastante P. & Dickieson B. (2013). Nuestra Senora de las Sobras: The Enigmatic Identity of Santa Muerte. *Journal of Southwest, 55*(4), 435-471.

Berger, P. L. (1990). *The sacred canopy: elements of a sociological theory of religion*. New York: Anchor Books.

Chestnut, R. A. (2012). *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint.* New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Granziera, P. (2004). From Coatlicue to Guadalupe: The Image of the Great Mother in Mexico. *Studies in World Christianity*, *10*(2), 250-273.

Gutierrez, L. (2015). *NAFTA and Neoliberalism: Globalization’s Impact on Mexico’s Indigenous People* [PowerPoint Slides].

Hughes, J. S. (2012). The Niño Jesús Doctor: Novelty and Innovation in Mexican Religion. *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions, 16*(2), 4-28.

Jean Franco (2004) The return of Coatlicue: Mexican nationalism and the Aztec past. *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies, 13*(2), 205-219.

O’Hara, M. D. (2012). The Supple Whip: Innovation and Tradition in Mexican Catholicism. *American Historical Review*, *117*(5), 1373-1401.

Pardo, O. F. (2006). *The Origins of Mexican Catholocism: Nahua Rituals and Christian Sacraments in Sixteenth-Century Mexico.* Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Sanchez, C. A. (2013). Death and the Colonial Difference: An Analysis of a Mexican Idea. *Journal of Philosophy of Life, 3(*3), 168-189.

1. Berger uses man as a gender neutral term, for the sake of explaining his theory, I will do the same [↑](#footnote-ref-1)