

R. Andrew Chesnut, *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2012) pp. ix + 221, \$99.00 hb; \$24.95 pb

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This is Andrew Chesnut's third book and in it he once again exhibits what sets his work apart in style and substance among academic studies of religion. To some extent, since such studies can sometimes be either boring or impenetrable, this is not a cause for regret, but his particular brand of starry-eyed, breathless reportage also has its drawbacks. This style was already detectable in his earlier books, *Born Again in Brazil: the Pentecostal boom and the pathogens of poverty* (1997), which seemed to validate Pentecostal claims about the thaumaturgic effects of their conversion, and *Competitive Spirits: Latin America's New Religious Economy* (2003) which was a highly readable but one-sided advertisement for the market theory of religion.

The organization of the book is according to the benefits to be derived from devotion or from acts or gestures of reverence to any popular saint: recovery from illness, prosperity, help in a lawsuit, success in business, and success in love. To illustrate these Chesnut recounts the stories and experiences he has heard on travels in Mexico and from experiences in the United States and in his home town.

Stated thus, the material sounds rather conventional, but of course the appearance of a popular saint in the guise of the medieval Grim Reaper but often decorated in the style of the Virgin of Guadalupe (even emanating dozens of rays and draped in a star-studded cloak) or, in Carlos Garma's words, in the funeral apparel of crowned nuns from the colonial period, invites a degree of surprise. This element of surprise is expressed in Chesnut's intensification of the style we saw in his earlier books: littering the text with exaggerated metaphors and cliché-ridden hyperbole such as 'the skeleton saint made no bones about her displeasure...' or 'the Skinny Lady blesses acts of vengeance keeping the trigger finger steady as enemies are lined up in the crosshairs'; 'the bony lady dressed in a white satin robe cut a queenly figure standing atop a golden throne'; 'within the sacred space of Lupe's rental unit, Saint Death hides in the intimacy of the bedroom'. He also includes a large amount of autobiography, such as an instance where his own sister recovered her boyfriend after making an offering to Santa Muerte, and various cameo appearances by his wife, his parents and his brother-in-law. The line between the personal and the analytical becomes even more porous when he describes himself as a 'semisuperstitious', and he often writes as if he credits the efficacy of the cures and remedies claimed to result from the work of Santa Muerte.

*Devoted to death* is about a cult which has generated excited conversation in the anthropological community for several years but so far without producing a specific explanation of why it has had such success. The cult has little of the standardization of ritual procedure which is inherent to a Christian saintly cult, and admits of almost any petition and any offering. Some offerings are financial, others are reminiscent of umbanda, like the cigarettes or joints perched on a pedestal. In addition, there are elaborate highly esoteric recipes for offerings which might work. (They are elaborate so that if the reward is not forthcoming one can always say that the recipe must have been slightly wrong.)

In this book Chesnut does not offer an explanation, either of the cult's success or of its structure, choosing instead to describe it as a kind of craze or panic. The catchy title is itself misleading: the people who bring offerings to Santa Muerte shrines are no more devoted to death than those who, on the Dia de los Muertos, take the widely distributed skeletal figurines dressed as campesinos or rancheros to visit the tombs of their departed relatives, and the book offers no evidence of such a macabre devotion, save in rumours of its popularity among *narcotraficantes*.

The absence of explanation is a feature of the book's quasi-populist approach, which offers no anthropological background in theory or in history, using mostly internet newspaper sources and one solitary book about folk saints in Spanish America. To be sure, academics sometimes exaggerate their scholarly apparatuses, but this is at the opposite extreme.

It is a mistake to think that because many, even millions, of people make offerings to shrines and images, therefore they are 'devoted' to a saint. For the most part they are probably just making the offerings on a whim or in the hope that maybe this gesture might bring them some luck, save in cases of sufferers from obsessive-compulsive disorders. To use the market approach which Chesnut adopted so enthusiastically in his previous book, these devotions are usually very low cost, so people engage in them 'just in case'. The Santa Muerte figures in innumerable shrines at roadsides, in homes and in city streets; an image to whom people come looking for help in solving any problem they might have; an image which is produced and reproduced on a large scale and distributed through innumerable souvenir and memorabilia outlets, or just to shops, in Mexico and the US. It also features the kaleidoscopic interaction of practices from a diversity of religious traditions – a ritual and symbolic promiscuity reflecting the loss of hegemony of religious authorities, Catholic and other. There is also something of an evangelical influence in the petitioning by people looking to change their way of life, to give up drugs and alcohol. The question which arises then is why it is that certain combinations and permutations take hold and reproduce themselves 'virally', while others do not.

These are fairly standard attributes of a saintly cult, but it has been roundly denounced by the Church hierarchy, and has certainly had its brush with scandal: the individual who set himself up as its Archbishop and registered it as a religion, has been incarcerated for his part in a kidnapping ring. Of course he claims he was set up by the establishment.

And so we come to the obvious question: how can people venerate (or 'adore') a skeleton? The answer should start not with shock and awe but with the banal: in the Catholic tradition all sorts of saints are venerated for all sorts of reasons. This one happens to have not a body but a skeleton.

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