

THE CULT OF SANTA MUERTE: THE DOMESTICATION OF SANCTITY

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Santa Muerte is a contradictory, transgressive, immoral saint that is venerated and beloved by millions. Her cult following has mushroomed over the course of the past decade or so. She is unsanctioned by the Catholic Church as well as by the Mexican government. What causes people who claim to be practicing Catholics to continue to venerate her despite the official condemnation of her cult, and what is the cause of her immense popularity? I seek to interpret the cult of Santa Muerte through Georges Bataille's *Theory of Religion*. In Bataille's *Theory of Religion*, he explains how people are searching for lost intimacy with the sacred. By "the sacred," he is referring to a state of consciousness in which humans experience a continuity in which they do not distinguish themselves as separate from everything else. Bataille explains how continuity is disrupted by the subject-object relationship and distinction of an individual as separate from an "other." This disruption is what characterizes a state of consciousness that Bataille calls discontinuity. Discontinuity is what Bataille considers the profane, and the disruption of consciousness is what keeps people subordinate to a state of awareness in "the world of things." Although all humans come from this state of continuity, they are now subordinate to discontinuity. People are only able to obtain momentary states of continuous consciousness through sacrifice, ritual, and subverting morality.

Bataille would say that people are attracted to Santa Muerte because she embodies subversive sanctity and the possibility to return to a state of continuity. It is evident, however, that Santa Muerte is becoming more and more a part of "the world of things." The more people seek to gain glimpses of the sacred through venerating the saint, the more Santa Muerte's subversive power is becoming domesticated and institutionalized. It seems that, paradoxically, the more that people venerate her, the more they are integrating her into the world of things. In

doing so, her devotees threaten to destroy the very thing that attracts them to her, which is Santa Muerte's subversive power and sanctity.

Origins of Santa Muerte

Santa Muerte is fondly known to many of her devotees by a number of different nick names. Some call her *La Huesuda* (The Bony Lady), *la Madrina* (the Godmother), *la Niña Blanca* (The White Girl), *la Niña Bonita* (The Pretty Girl), and *la Dama Poderosa* (The Powerful Lady).¹ She is often represented as a female version of the Grim Reaper, popularly depicted as the "skeletal figure of a cloaked woman with a scythe in her bony hand."² Many "devotees and manufacturers of mass-produced images of the Bony Lady usually dress her as a nun, the Virgin, a bride, or a queen."³ Additionally, "red and black medieval tunics, white bridal gowns, and flowing bright colored satin robes normally cover her skeletal body, leaving only her bony hands, feet, and face."⁴ Interestingly she is depicted as a full skeleton, and so the only indicators of her gender are her clothing and sometimes her hair.⁵ While there are at least two other male skeleton saints in Latin America, she is notably the only female skeleton saint in the Americas. Unlike most other saints, both folk and canonized, she has never been attributed to a specific human being in historical time. There are a number of different explanations of the origins of her cult.

¹ Andrew R. Chesnut, *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint* (New York: Oxford University, 2012) 3-8.

² Paul Raushenbush, "Vatican Calls Santa Muerte, Mexico's 'Death Saint,' Blasphemous." *The Huffington Post*, 8 May 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/05/08/vatican-santa-muerte_n_3241725.html (accessed March 11, 2014).

³ *Devoted to Death*, 8.

⁴ *Devoted to Death*, 8.

⁵ *Devoted to Death*, 8.

One of the most common explanations of Santa Muerte's development is that she is a hybridization of Catholicism and an indigenous religious practice. According to Andrew Chesnut, "Santa Muerte is thought to have originated as Mictecacihuatl, the Aztec goddess of death who along with her husband Mictlantecuhtli ruled over the underworld, Mictlan." The two gods of the dead were typically represented as skeletons or human bodies with skulls for heads.⁶ Although Mictecacihuatl and Mictlantecuhtli were rulers of the underworld, the Aztecs would also invoke the gods' supernatural powers for earthly causes. During the Spanish Conquest, indigenous religions were being persecuted, and Chesnut believes that this is what initially drove the cult underground.⁷ Other people have different theories as to the Skeleton Saint's origins.

People who are familiar with the European Grim Reaper sometimes trace Santa Muerte back to medieval Europe. During the fourteenth century medieval Europe, death was such a pervasive force in the lives of the people that the Catholics personified it as a male in the form of the Grim Reaper. Chesnut explains, "Painters, sculptors, and priests began to employ the skeletal representation of death in their work."⁸ Additionally, the death dance in association with the Grim Reaper became part of the medieval Catholic tradition. This was played out as a performance in which "Catholic clerics had actors in skeletal costumes perform the dance of death" and "some of the performers would move to the rhythm for the last time before being escorted by the Grim Reaper to the spirit world."⁹ Some people theorize that it was the Spanish clergy who brought the European personification of death to the Americas.

⁶ *Devoted to Death*, 28.

⁷ *Devoted to Death*, 28.

⁸ *Devoted to Death*, 30.

⁹ *Devoted to Death*, 30.

There are two male skeleton saints in Latin America, one named Rey Pascual in Guatemala and Chiapas, and the other is called San La Muerte in Argentina and Paraguay, both of whom may be traditions from which Santa Muerte developed. Rey Pascual is thought to be a hybridization of the sixteenth-century Spanish Franciscan saint Pascual Bailón and Mayan religion.¹⁰ The Franciscan friar supposedly appeared to a Mayan man in the 1650s during the time of a plague and he is credited with ending it. The Mayans now work with Rey Pascual as a helper during their healing ceremonies. Both Rey Pascual and San La Muerte in Argentina may also be a fusion of Christ and the Grim Reaper.

Chesnut makes a connection between San La Muerte with the figure of Christ the Just Judge in Mexico and Central America. San La Muerte has two monikers which relate the Argentinean male skeleton saint to Jesus. The first moniker is San Justo (Saint Justice), and the second is el Señor de la Paciencia (Lord of Patience), “which in Mexico and Central America is better known as Christ the Just Judge.”¹¹ Christ the Just Judge is the “representation of the despondent, defeated Christ after his flogging and before his death on the cross.”¹² Chesnut asserts that this connection may indicate that the skeleton saint is a syncretic fusion of the Grim Reaper and Jesus. Remarkably, the male representations of death survived religious persecution in Guatemala and Argentina, while in Mexico the male image seems to have been replaced by the Bony Lady.

Unlike her male counterparts, Santa Muerte has never been connected to an actual person in historical time. Even within the folk saint tradition, Santa Muerte is a unique figure. The

¹⁰ *Devoted to Death*, 31.

¹¹ *Devoted to Death*, 32.

¹² *Devoted to Death*, 32.

majority of folk saints were born and died in Latin America. Chesnut notes, “Where the Skinny Lady differs from other folk saints, including the skeleton saints of Argentina (San La Muerte) and Guatemala (Rey Pascual), is that for most devotees she is the personification of death itself and not of a deceased human being.”¹³ Santa Muerte seems to be an exception in both the folk saint tradition as well as the traditional Catholic saint tradition. Although there is very little information about the origins of Santa Muerte, there is even less information about how long she has been venerated.

It seems that people have been venerating Santa Muerte clandestinely from around 1797-2002. Specific references to Santa Muerte first appear in the Spanish colonial record in the 1790s.¹⁴ The cult disappeared from Mexican historical record for the next century and a half. For over two centuries veneration of Santa Muerte was an occult affair. Chesnut remarks, “Given the history of persecution at the hands of the Church, and the unorthodox, if not satanic, implications of devotion to death personified, adherents of the White Girl largely kept their relationship with her to themselves or within their small circles of family and friends.”¹⁵ There is no record of Santa Muerte specifically until the 1940s. Four anthropologists mention Santa Muerte in their work done in the 1940s and 1950s in reference to her role as a love sorceress. For the next fifty years she is almost “exclusively the Powerful Lady of Love.”¹⁶ Santa Muerte’s cult resurfaced around the early twenty-first century and has taken Mexico by storm. I situate my analysis of the cult of Santa Muerte during the period of her meteoric comeback in the early 2000s.

¹³ *Devoted to Death*, 6.

¹⁴ *Devoted to Death*, 31.

¹⁵ *Devoted to Death*, 37.

¹⁶ *Devoted to Death*, 33.

Back into the Limelight

Santa Muerte is one of the most popular saints called upon in Mexico. Her popularity is said to be comparable to the Virgin of Guadalupe, St. Jude (the saint of lost causes), and Jesus. Over the past decade the veneration of Santa Muerte has become “a full-fledged mainstream cult with two million to five million followers, practiced in an increasingly public fashion both in Mexico and the United States.”¹⁷ Chesnut reports that veneration and sales of the Bony Lady’s items have grown within the past years.¹⁸ Chesnut remarks, “Ranking higher than other saints, martyrs, and even the Virgin Mary, Santa Muerte is conceived of as an archangel (of death) who really only takes orders from God himself.”¹⁹ Although it is unclear as to what led to the sudden popularity and public veneration of Santa Muerte, Chesnut attributes a quesadilla vendor and her public shrine to being the primary reason for the transformation of the cult of Santa Muerte from a clandestine practice to a public cult.

One of the most popular shrines and places of veneration is located in Tepito, one of Mexico’s roughest barrios. Enriqueta Romero, also known as “Doña Queta”, is a resident of Tepito, and it is she whom Chesnut attributes to bringing the veneration of the Bony Lady out from the occult and into the public.²⁰ Chesnut called Doña Queta the “godmother of the cult” because she and her family started one of the first public shrines to Santa Muerte.²¹ Queta is a quesadilla vendor who acquired a life-size statue of Santa Muerte from her son out of gratitude to

¹⁷ D.E Campbell, “A Saint for Lost Souls,” *Foreign Policy*, May/June Issue 179 (2010), 1.

¹⁸ *Devotion to Death*, 8.

¹⁹ *Devoted to Death*, 60.

²⁰ *Devoted to Death*, 37.

²¹ *Devoted to Death*, 41.

the saint for her help with his speedy release from jail. Doña Queta and her husband ended up creating a glass-encased altar attached to the front wall of her home because of the interest that neighbors and friends expressed in venerating Santa Muerte.²² Hundreds of visitors are reported to now visit the shrine daily in order to touch the glass case with their hands.²³ Devotion to Santa Muerte has risen rapidly in Mexico over the past decade. Some devotees seem to turn to Santa Muerte after having tried various other saints.

Some try praying to more traditional saints but feel that their prayers are not being heard so they switch to venerating Santa Muerte. For example, twenty-something Mexico City cab driver Ernesto, started praying to the Bony Lady for a speedy release from prison after feeling that the Virgin of Guadalupe and Saint Jude were not answering his prayers.²⁴ He was released from prison within one year after switching to venerating Santa Muerte. It is clear that Santa Muerte has become one of Mexico's most popular saints. But what has led to the rapid rise in her popularity and what is the significance of the rise of the cult of Saint Death?

Among the Scholars: Interpreting the Cult's Significance

In the introduction to his book, *Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte the Skeleton Saint*, Andrew Chesnut, the leading scholar of the cult of Saint Death, explains the "Skeleton Saint's" rise in popularity as a result of her reputation for miracle working. Chesnut stresses that the Santa Muerte is not just a saint of the drug cartels but that she appeals to a diverse group of devotees. Santa Muerte is "[first] and foremost an unofficial saint who heals, protects, and

²² *Devoted to Death*, 37-39.

²³ *Devoted to Death*, 39.

²⁴ *Devoted to Death*, 59.

delivers devotees to their destinations in the afterlife.”²⁵ Chesnut believes that Santa Muerte’s reputation for being such a powerful miracle worker is what “has propelled the meteoric growth of her cult since 2001.”²⁶ Other scholars explain the Cult of Santa Muerte in light of the political, social and economic turmoil that is occurring in Mexico.

In an article entitled “A Saint for Lost Souls,” D. E. Campbell connects the rise of the cult of Santa Muerte to the economic and political hardships in Mexico and the resulting violence from the devastating drug war. Campbell attributes Santa Muerte’s following to the poor, claiming that “Santa Muerte's popularity, rooted in dangerous urban areas like Tepito and the rural regions that increasingly resemble them, reflects economic and political uncertainty in a country where almost 50 million people live below the poverty line.”²⁷ This economic instability combined with the drug war is what has caused desperate impoverished people to turn to Saint Death for protection and comfort. Campbell claims, “The faith's recent growth coincides with developments that have disproportionately affected its already marginalized followers.”²⁸ She sees the cult as a means for the marginalized populations to find comfort in times when death is one of the most powerful forces in their lives. By turning to Saint Death directly, people seek comfort in the very force that threatens to destroy them. Other scholars connect the cult of Saint Death to those who are marginalized and explain that the cult is a means of empowerment for the poor.

²⁵ *Devoted to Death*, 7.

²⁶ *Devoted to Death*, 8.

²⁷ “A Saint for Lost Souls,” 1.

²⁸ “A Saint for Lost Souls,” 1.

Desirée A. Martín's interpretation of the significance of the cult of Santa Muerte is that the Bony Lady is a symbol of empowerment for marginalized people because, through venerating her, people are able to subvert both political and religious institutions. In her book entitled *Borderlands Saints: Secular Sanctity in Chicano/a and Mexican Culture*, Martín argues that "Santa Muerte is popular precisely because of her controversial and contradictory nature."²⁹ She further explains that, "instead of functioning as an obstacle for the faithful, Santa Muerte's contradictory and unruly character allows devotees to articulate their own narratives of equality in order to embrace their own ambiguous status within society."³⁰ In so many words, Martín's main argument is that Santa Muerte is important because she acts as a means of empowerment for marginalized peoples. While I agree that Santa Muerte is popular because of her transgressive nature, I interpret the reasoning for why this is important through a different lens.

Using Georges Bataille's *Theory of Religion* I seek to interpret the cult of Santa Muerte from a religious studies perspective. Bataille would say that it is through the contradictions, transgressions, immorality and lawlessness that Santa Muerte's power and sanctity lies. It is this same subversive power and seeming potential to connect people to the sacred that has attracted so many people to venerate the Bony Lady. Bataille would say that as Santa Muerte becomes more and more institutionalized and therefore part of "the world of things," her powers to connect people to an experience of the sacred will be domesticated and significantly diminished, if not all together lost.

Bataille's Theory of Religion

²⁹ Desirée A. Martín, *Borderlands Saints: Secular Sanctity in Chicano/a and Mexican Culture*. (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press. 2014), 31.

³⁰ *Borderlands Saints*, 31.

Georges Bataille's *Theory of Religion* completely contradicts traditional conceptions of the purpose of religion. For Bataille, religion has nothing to do with trying to help people create meaning in their lives. Religion is not about obtaining salvation, maintaining morality, nor is it about bringing people together. For Bataille, religion is about subverting all forms of meaning, order, and reason in order to invoke a return to consciousness that is characterized by a state of continuity. The essence of religion in Bataille's theory is "the search for lost intimacy."³¹ Bataille is referring to the return to lost continuity when he talks about the return to "lost intimacy." Religion is the search for lost continuity and the sacred is the experience of this continuity.

Bataille defines the sacred as a state of consciousness that is experienced as a continuous state of mind, which he calls continuity. In continuity, "nothing is posited beyond the present"—there is no conceptualization of the future.³² Continuity is a form of animalistic consciousness—Bataille writes, "every animal is *in the world like water in water*."³³ There is no distinction between the animal as a separate entity from the rest of the world; there is continuity between the animal and everything else. Continuity is a primitive form of consciousness from which humans evolved. Bataille explains, "the animal opens before me a depth that attracts me and is familiar to me. In a sense, I know this depth: it is my own."³⁴ This state of continuity is one that all humans come from; it is their depth and their essence and the state to which they seek to return. The creation of tools is what first created a separation of humans as subjects distinct from other objects.

³¹ *Theory of Religion*, 57.

³² *Theory of Religion*, 18.

³³ *Theory of Religion*, 19.

³⁴ *Theory of Religion*, 22.

Tools create discontinuity because they form a subject-object relationship with humans. Bataille identifies the development of the tool as the development of “the nascent form of the non-I.”³⁵ Awareness of the “non-I” as an object distinct from the self creates discontinuity. The continuity of consciousness is disrupted through the development of tools, because humans become distinguished as subjects in relationship to the tool as an object. People use tools as a means to a future end, which creates a state of consciousness that includes the notion of a future which also takes them out of continuity. Bataille defines the state of discontinuity as the profane world.

Bataille claims that the world experienced as discontinuity is the profane world. Bataille states that “insofar as it is spirit, the human reality is holy, but it is profane insofar as it is real.”³⁶ Humans are part of both the sacred mythical world as well as the real world. Everything that is “real” is everything experienced as the discontinuity of consciousness. The order of things is the profane world of discontinuity, in which the subject-object relationship exists. Discontinuity and the “world of things” are what prevent humans from the experience of intimacy with the sacred. The profane world or “the world of things is perceived as a fallen world.”³⁷ Although the sacred is subordinate to the profane world, it is always threatening to destroy the discontinuity of consciousness.

The intimate sacred world is constantly threatening to disrupt the discontinuity of the profane world. Bataille explains, “The sacred is that prodigious effervescence of life that, for the sake of duration, the order of things holds in check, and that this holding changes into a breaking

³⁵ *Theory of Religion*, 27.

³⁶ *Theory of Religion*, 38.

³⁷ *Theory of Religion*, 41.

loose, that is, into violence.”³⁸ The sacred “constantly threatens to break the dikes, to confront productive activity with the precipitate and contagious movement of a purely glorious consumption.”³⁹ Although the order of things is oppressive and keeps us from experiencing the sacred, there is always a constant threat to the destruction of the order. Humans’ greatest longing is to return to intimacy with the sacred.

Humans are now only able to occasionally return to intimacy with the sacred through rituals. Bataille explains, “Of course archaic man did not continually participate in the contagious violence of intimacy, but if he was removed from it, the rituals always kept the power to bring him back to that proper time.”⁴⁰ Through the rituals humans are able to occasionally return to lost intimacy. Although through rituals humans may experience a type of restoration and return to intimacy, this is only momentary. Sacrifice is one means through which people have the potential to return to continuity.

Sacrifice is a means through which people are able to ritually obtain a glimpse of the continuity of consciousness. Sacrifice “calls for the general negation of individuals as such.”⁴¹ Sacrifice enables individuals to destroy their selfhood because they destroy the subject-object relationship and therefore they may momentarily experience continuity. Individuals must experience a negation of themselves as individual selves in order to experience continuity. In sacrifice:

The individual identifies with the victim and in the sudden movement that restores it to immanence (to intimacy), but the assimilation that is linked to the return to immanence is

³⁸ *Theory of Religion*, 52.

³⁹ *Theory of Religion*, 53.

⁴⁰ *Theory of Religion*, 74.

⁴¹ *Theory of Religion*, 53.

nonetheless based on the fact that the victim is the thing, just as the sacrificer is the individual.⁴²

Through the destruction of the thing, the object-subject relationship is momentarily destroyed. Thus, the individual is able to momentarily experience something similar to continuity of consciousness. The festival is another way in which humans may return to intimacy with the sacred.

The festival is the means through which people are able to gain glimpses of the sacred within the limits of prudence. Through the festival, “the consumption of the contagious offering (communion) opens up a conflagration, but one that is limited by a countervailing prudence: there is an aspiration for destruction that breaks out in the festival, but there is a conservative prudence that regulates and limits it.”⁴³ Bataille explains, “the letting loose of the festival is finally, if not fettered, then at least confined to the limits of a reality of which it is the negation.”⁴⁴ Although the consumption of the offering occurs, the destruction of the subject-object relationship is limited to the specific offering. Bataille concludes, “The festival is not a true return to immanence but rather an amicable reconciliation, full of anguish, between the incompatible necessities.”⁴⁵ People cannot fully return to the sacred without completely destroying their objective reality. Thus they must seek a reconciliation of the two worlds, which results in them prolonging an experience of utter anguish and longing.

The sacred causes people to feel a sense of anguish and longing for the return to intimacy with the sacred. For Bataille, “Intimacy, in the “trembling of the individual, is holy, sacred, and

⁴² *Theory of Religion*, 51.

⁴³ *Theory of Religion*, 54.

⁴⁴ *Theory of Religion*, 54.

⁴⁵ *Theory of Religion*, 55.

suffused with anguish.”⁴⁶ Humans are never able to return to continuity fully or for a sustained period of time, and the best that they can do is to strive to experience momentary glimpses of the continuity of consciousness. Although Bataille wrote an extensive amount in order to articulate his theory, throughout *Theory of Religion* he never gives one real life example of how his theory of religion might function when applied to a real-life religious phenomenon. Thus, it is my task to set about testing Bataille’s theory of religion by applying it to the cult of Santa Muerte.

A Symbol of Subversive Sanctity

Santa Muerte as a figure does not subscribe to the element of morality that is subordinate to the real order. Many people turn to Santa Muerte because of her reputation as an immoral saint who does not judge. Some people ask Santa Muerte for things for which they would not ask a more traditional saint such as the Virgin of Guadalupe. Although Santa Muerte supposedly took the place of Archangel Michael, complete with the set of scales, she is not a judge of people’s souls.⁴⁷ Instead Santa Muerte could be more accurately described as “a supernatural attorney who represents her devoted clients regardless of the crimes they may have committed.”⁴⁸ Santa Muerte is unconcerned with her devotees’ “guilt or innocence, she seeks the best deal possible for her clients.”⁴⁹ In light of this, Santa Muerte seems to embody the subversive sanctity that is obtained through amorality.

Santa Muerte does not adhere to morality, and thus she embodies subversive sanctity through her amoral personality. Bataille claims that morality acts as a system of keeping

⁴⁶ *Theory of Religion*, 52.

⁴⁷ *Devoted to Death*, 60.

⁴⁸ *Devoted to Death*, 178.

⁴⁹ *Devoted to Death*, 178.

individuals in a state of discontinuity. Bataille writes, “Reflective thought defines moral rules; it prescribes universally obligatory relations between individuals and society or between individuals themselves.”⁵⁰ Morality is grounded in obligatory relationships between an individual and other distinct objects/subjects, which requires that the individual remains in a state of discontinuity.⁵¹ Even if morality “gets part of the laws it decrees from religion, it grounds them, like the others, in *reason*; it links them to the order of *things*.”⁵² Morality is grounded in reason, and thus it maintains the subject-object relationship that perpetuates a state of discontinuity. Additionally, morality “condemns, in a general way, all useless consumption.”⁵³ Thus, morality condemns the very means through which individuals may experience continuity of consciousness. Santa Muerte’s apparent disregard for morality is one way in which she subverts the systems that keep people in a state of discontinuity.

Santa Muerte vs. The Catholic Institution

The Catholic Church’s official saint making process and ideals of sanctity exhibit the institution’s commitment to a type of sanctity that is grounded in morality and the real order. Canonized saints in the Catholic Church are declared saints through a highly regulated process. Saint making in the Roman Catholic Church “is a protracted, painstaking process orchestrated by officials of the Vatican and governed by legal norms and procedures.”⁵⁴ Traditionally, saints are

⁵⁰ *Theory of Religion*, 70.

⁵¹ *Theory of Religion*, 70.

⁵² *Theory of Religion*, 70.

⁵³ *Theory of Religion*, 71.

⁵⁴ Kenneth L. Woodward, *Making Saints: How the Catholic Church Determines Who becomes a Saint, Who Doesn't, and Why*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990) 50.

recognized for embodying a type of sanctity determined by strict moral virtue.⁵⁵ Bataille would say that the numerous claims that Santa Muerte is a symbol of immoral transgressive folk Catholicism are key components of what make her so powerfully appealing to people.

The Catholic Church as an institution officially condemns the veneration of Santa Muerte. During a press conference in September 2004 “the president of the Mexican Bishops’ Conference, José Guadalupe Martín Rábago, denounced devotion to Santa Muerte as satanic and complained of the excessively liberal government policy of granting legal status to such religious groups.”⁵⁶ José Guadalupe Martín Rábago stated:

“We are realizing how groups that are not exactly good for the well being of Mexican society are too easily being granted legal standing as religious associations. Groups with satanic practices exist and they do psychological damage to young people, and I have experience with this because parents and even kids themselves have come to me under the influence of these sects, and they are psychologically disturbed and disoriented. The damage done to them is very severe.”⁵⁷

It is evident that representatives of the Catholic Church as an institution are opposed to the cult and think that it is psychologically harmful to the devotees. The claim that the cult is satanic is a viewpoint that has been publicly expressed by other Church officials as well.

Many Catholic Church officials claim that the veneration of Santa Muerte is a satanic practice. In Tuscan, AZ, Reverend Juan Carlos Aguire reportedly “told a curious parishioner to destroy her statuette of the Bony Lady because the Catholic Church views it as ‘satanic

⁵⁵ *Making of Saints*, 71.

⁵⁶ *Devoted to Death*, 44.

⁵⁷ *Devoted to Death*, 44.

idolatry.”⁵⁸ Additionally, Father Sergio Román, a Mexican priest, explains that the veneration of Saint Death is theologically equivalent to the veneration of Satan:

“Scripture tells us, in the Gospels, that the last enemy that Jesus will defeat is death, and thus death as a figure is the enemy of Christ. In other words, Christ has come to defeat death, and he does so with his resurrection. This is the position of Christian theology, not just Catholic but also Protestant, and all Christian religions. And in this sense to venerate or worship death is to worship the enemy of Christ. And the adversary of Christ, also in the Bible, the one considered his main adversary is Satan. So in this way devotion to death has a satanic meaning. In other words, whoever worships death in one way or another is worshipping Satan.”⁵⁹

Although perhaps Father Sergio Román may have made a leap in his theological interpretation, he is representing the common viewpoint of the institutional Catholic Church and some publicly held beliefs about the cult of Santa Muerte.

In May of 2013 Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi, the Vatican’s culture minister, publicly spoke out against the death cult on behalf of the Vatican in Mexico City as part of the Vatican’s “Courtyard of the Gentiles.” According to a *Huffington Post* article, Ravasi claimed that, “worshipping such an icon is a degeneration of religion” and that Santa Muerte “is a blasphemous symbol that shouldn't be part of any religion.”⁶⁰ Other members of the institutional Catholic Church also condemn the veneration of Santa Muerte.

In his article “Mexico’s Crisis of Faith,” Phillip Jenkins claims that the cult exemplifies how many Mexicans are practicing a spiritually corrupt form of Catholicism despite calling themselves Catholics. Jenkins claims that the cult of Santa Muerte is a “subversive pseudo-

⁵⁸ *Devoted to Death*, 54.

⁵⁹ *Devoted to Death*, 54.

Paul Raushenbush, "Vatican Calls Santa Muerte, Mexico's 'Death Saint,' Blasphemous," *The Huffington Post*, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/05/08/vatican-santa-muerte_n_3241725.html (accessed March 11, 2014).

Catholicism that veers close to outright diabolism.” Jenkins contends that it is “troubling” to find that many ordinary people “unhesitatingly describe themselves as Christian and Catholic but . . . in fact follow a twisted caricature of orthodox faith, in which religion is wholly separated from morality.”⁶¹ Continuing along the rhetoric of immoral religious practice, Jenkins states, “Poor believers went much further in developing their own alternate and unauthorized forms of folk Catholicism, centered on evil or criminal entities.”⁶² Jenkins goes on to state that practices such as the veneration of the Bony Lady illustrate “the yawning gulf that separates popular practice from any traditional concept of Christian faith.”⁶³ Jenkins’ description of the corruption of Christianity and the destruction of morality are all evidence that Bataille would use to describe how Santa Muerte is an example of subversive sanctity. The subversive sanctity embodied by the cult is also evident in the conflict between one Catholic priest and his fight to have his religious organization legally recognized by the Catholic institution and the Mexican government.

Father Romo is a proponent of the institutionalization of Santa Muerte and has been involved in direct conflicts with the Catholic institution as well as with the Mexican government. David Romo is a self-appointed archbishop of the cult of Santa Muerte. In the 1980s, Romo became the director of a traditionalist Catholic group who left the Roman Catholic Church because they objected to the reforms of the Second Vatican Council.⁶⁴ After many of the members attending his church started worshipping Santa Muerte, he investigated to see if Christian theology permitted the veneration of Saint Death. He determined that it was aligned

⁶¹ Jenkins, Phillip, “Mexico’s Crisis of Faith”, *Christian Century* 138, Issue 6 (2011), 53.

⁶² “Mexico’s Crisis of Faith,” 53.

⁶³ “Mexico’s Crisis of Faith,” 53.

⁶⁴ *Devoted to Death*, 43.

with Christian theology and he incorporated her into his temple in 2003. According to Chesnut “Padre David (as he’s affectionately known to church members) is at the vanguard of an attempt to institutionalize devotion to the Angel of Death.”⁶⁵ Father Romo has been the most vocal devotee about wanting to institutionalize the cult, and as a result he has experienced powerful opposition from the Catholic Church as an institution in conjunction with the Mexican government.

Father Romo and his temple have had a number of conflicts with the Mexican government as well as the Catholic institution. Father Romo’s traditionalist community is called the Mexico-USA Tridentine Catholic Church. He filed to register his church in 2000 with the Mexican government, and received acceptance as an officially recognized religious organization in 2003.⁶⁶ That same year, on August 15th, the feast day of the Virgin Mary, Father Romo incorporated Santa Muerte into the religious organization’s official set of beliefs and practices.⁶⁷ Chesnut remarks, “Father David’s very public association of the two female giants of the Mexican (and parts of the American) religious landscape most likely played a major part in the decision on the part of the Fox administration in 2005 to revoke the church’s official recognition.”⁶⁸ Although it was the Mexican government who withdrew his organization’s status as a recognized religious organization, Father Romo believes that the Catholic Church was responsible for the revocation of his cChesnuthurch’s official recognition.⁶⁹ Supposedly it was

⁶⁵ *Devoted to Death*, 41.

⁶⁶ *Devoted to Death*, 42.

⁶⁷ *Devoted to Death*, 43.

⁶⁸ *Devoted to Death*, 43.

⁶⁹ *Devoted to Death*, 44.

disgruntled priests within Romo's own religious community who initially complained about the incorporation of Santa Muerte into the community. Ironically, Padre Romo seems to have made the cult even more of a symbol of subversive sanctity by trying to institutionalize it. The cult of Santa Muerte also subverts the Mexican government, which is another means through which the Bony Lady embodies subversive sanctity.

Santa Muerte, the Drug Cartels and the Mexican Government

The current administration of Mexico is lead by President Calderón, a National Action Party (PAN) member. The PAN is currently the favored political party of the Catholic Church.⁷⁰ Thus, the Calderón administration has close ties with the Catholic Church in Mexico. Both the Mexican government and the institutional Catholic Church are two powerful institutions that are in direct opposition to the cult of Santa Muerte. Martín remarks, "Santa Muerte's status as the religious enemy of the state also derives from her perceived opposition to the ruling National Action Party (PAN) of President Calderón."⁷¹ Santa Muerte has become a symbol of the drug cartels, and as a result the Calderón administration appears to have declared war on her cult.

The Mexican government bulldozed dozens of Santa Muerte shrines along the Mexico-U.S. border within the past few years. Because of her association with the drug cartel, "Saint Death has been targeted by the Calderón administration as religious enemy number one."⁷² The shrines to Santa Muerte began to appear along the border in 2007.⁷³ In March 2009, the Calderón administration "sent the army to Nuevo Laredo, Tijuana, and other sites on the border to raze

⁷⁰ *Borderlands Saints*, 113.

⁷¹ *Borderlands Saints*, 113.

⁷² *Devoted to Death*, 102.

⁷³ *Borderlands Saints*, 4.

dozens of roadside shrines to the Skinny Lady.”⁷⁴ Both Chesnut and Martín attribute these actions to the government’s war on the drug cartels. According to Martín:

Military officials have provided different reasons for the destruction of the shrines, relying upon both bureaucracy and fear-mongering as they cite the lack of proper permits to build on federal land and identify the altars as ‘narcoshrines’ that must be demolished as part of the government’s war on the drug cartels.⁷⁵

Regardless of the military’s true motivations, one thing that is certain is that “in leveling the shrines of Saint Death on the border with Texas and California, the PAN-ista administration did a big favor to the Catholic Church by eliminating in one fell swoop tens of competing sacred sites.”⁷⁶ The war on the cult of Santa Muerte by the Catholic institution, as well as by the Mexican government, illustrate how the Bony Lady embodies subversive sanctity. Santa Muerte subverts these two major systems and economies and thus she subverts a major part of the real order.

The Economy of Exchange and the World of Work

Both the Catholic Church and the Mexican government are inherently part of the world of things in that they are two systems that operate by means of law, morality, and reason, and they make people into tools of their systems. In the world of work, “man is an individual to the extent that his apprehension ties him to the results of labor.”⁷⁷ By participating in an economy, people are acting as tools and using tools in order to create future outcomes. Tools and utility keep humans in subordination to the world of things; tools maintain the subject-object relationship, and therefore they ensure that people remain subordinate to a state of discontinuity of

⁷⁴ *Devoted to Death*, 45.

⁷⁵ *Borderlands Saints*, 6.

⁷⁶ *Borderlands Saints*, 114.

⁷⁷ *Theory of Religion*, 51.

consciousness. Bataille would explain the fact that the cult of Santa Muerte subverts both the Mexican government and the Catholic institution as an example of how the cult embodies subversive sanctity because it opposes these two major systems of exchange and utility. Although the cult of Santa Muerte, and Saint Death herself as a figure, embody subversive sanctity, it seems that even the seemingly more subversive drug-cartel devotees remain subordinate to some form of economy of exchange.

Although the drug traffickers are one of the main reasons for which the two institutions are so opposed to the cult of Santa Muerte, they themselves are actually still part of a different economy. All drug cartel members are enemies of the Mexican government, and are fighting against these forms of law and reason. However, they are still very much symbols of utility because the drug trafficking culture creates its own economy and system of utility. Although the drug traffickers are subverting the Mexican government, they are still working and being used as tools for drug trade, which is its own system of exchange and economy. Thus, drug traffickers are still part of an economy of exchange and the world of work because each gang member is a tool for the overall system of the drug trade; consequentially, the drug traffickers remain subordinate to discontinuity and the world of things. Although the drug traffickers may not themselves be liberated from the profane world, their popular association with the cult of Santa Muerte makes the cult in itself a form of taboo.

Santa Muerte: Cultural Taboo

The cult of Santa Muerte has a reputation for being associated with evil, transgressive, and criminal activity. Although the darker devotional practices are not the only aspect of the cult,

this aspect is more popularly emphasized in mass media and public opinion,⁷⁸ which has served to create a cultural taboo and fear surrounding the Pretty Lady's cult. Over the past decade, low-level drug dealers as well as high-ranking cartel bosses and hit men have been found with evidence of devotion to Santa Muerte. They have been found with tattoos, pendants, engraved pistols and other items that demonstrate their devotion to Saint Death.⁷⁹ The association of the drug cartel with the cult of Santa Muerte contributes to the taboo nature of venerating the Skinny Lady.

Due to the association with the drug cartel, there is a strong cultural taboo surrounding the cult of Santa Muerte. In a report that is part of the *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, Robert J. Bunker explains, "Peace officers in cartel training have stated that they will have nothing to do with such Santa Muerte artifacts as altars, candles, statues, amulets, pictures, and sacrificial items because they consider them evil and, as a result, will not enter dwellings that contain them."⁸⁰ This example captures the general taboo nature of the cult of Santa Muerte, and the fear that surrounds it. The taboo nature surrounding the cult of Santa Muerte adds to her seeming image as the embodiment of Bataille's version of subversive sanctity.

Bataille explains that humans feel ambiguous toward that which they determine is sacred, and the cult of Santa Muerte seems to embody this mixture of fear and fascination with the sacred. Bataille explains, "Man feels a kind of impotent horror in the sense of the sacred."⁸¹ The fear that people feel in association with Santa Muerte helps create the taboo image of the Bony

⁷⁸ *Devoted to Death*, 96.

⁷⁹ *Devoted to Death*, 103.

⁸⁰ Robert J. Bunker, "Santa Muerte: Inspired and Ritualistic Killings (Part 3 of 3)", *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, Vol. 82 Issue 2, (Feb2013), 2.

⁸¹ *Theory of Religion*, 36.

Lady. The “impotent horror” that humans feel is because “undoubtedly what is sacred attracts and possesses an incomparable value, but at the same time it appears vertiginously dangerous for that clear and profane world.”⁸² Although people are intrigued by her image, there is also considerable societal condemnation of the veneration of Santa Muerte as well as fear that surrounds her cult, which are important factors in maintaining her cult’s reputation as a cultural taboo. Despite the fact that Santa Muerte has strong associations with subversive sanctity, her devotees fail to liberate themselves from discontinuity in their devotion to the Pretty Girl. Many people venerate Santa Muerte out of a fear of death, which ensure that they maintain a consciousness of discontinuity.

Fear of Death and Discontinuity

The fear of death that holds humans in the world of things is played out in the relationship and reasons for which many people venerate Santa Muerte. Humans are afraid of death as soon as they enter “the system of projects that is the order of things.”⁸³ When people are striving for future outcomes of a specific project, they are maintaining a level of consciousness that includes the ability to be aware of a time beyond the present. This grounds them in the real order as individuals, which prevents them from experiencing the longed for continuity of consciousness. Bataille explains that “the anxiousness to remain personally alive that establishes the person’s individuality is linked to the integration of existence into the world of things.”⁸⁴ This perpetuation of subordination to the real order is evident through the ways in which people venerate Santa Muerte.

⁸² *Theory of Religion*, 36.

⁸³ *Theory of Religion*, 52.

⁸⁴ *Theory of Religion*, 51.

Many people turn to Santa Muerte because of their fear of death. Chesnut remarks, “Knowing that their eminently dangerous trade could very well lead them to such violent deaths, scores of devotees, working at all levels of the ultra-lucrative industry, implore the saint of death to prolong their life and spare them from a horrific demise.”⁸⁵ Through the fear of death, the people venerating Santa Muerte are maintaining their individuality and state of subordination to the real order. Chesnut goes on to explain that “for Mexican drug dealers and police officers alike, the real possibility of violent death on a daily basis leads to a heightened awareness of their own demise. Who better to watch over those whose lives are constantly on the line than she who has the power to both preserve and extinguish life.”⁸⁶ Many devotees beyond the drug traffickers and law enforcement members also turn to Saint Death herself for fear of death. The fear of death that is evident among most Santa Muerte devotees demonstrates how, although people may long for continuity, in their devotion to Saint Death they continue to fail to liberate themselves from the real order.

Death from Bataille’s perspective seems to exemplify the potential for intimacy with the sacred, while at the same time humans tend to fear death which keeps them in the world of things. Bataille writes, “Death reveals life in its plentitude and dissolves the real order.”⁸⁷ It has the potential to act as a liberating force from the order of things because “death disturbs the order of things and the order of things holds us.”⁸⁸ Santa Muerte is the personification of death, and thus she in herself embodies the potential to subvert the real order. The Bony Lady embodies

⁸⁵ *Devoted to Death*, 98.

⁸⁶ *Devoted to Death*, 103.

⁸⁷ *Theory of Religion*, 47.

⁸⁸ *Theory of Religion*, 52.

Bataille's idea of sanctity because she is liberated from the world of things as is death. However, rather than capitalizing on death as a liberating force, because humans are afraid of death, they continue to remain subordinate to the order of things. The process of asking for miracles is another example of how devotees continue to remain subordinate to discontinuity and the real order.

Miracles, Reciprocity and the Economy of Exchange

Santa Muerte has a reputation for being one of the greatest miracle workers, and a culture of reciprocity surrounds this aspect of her cult. People turn to Santa Muerte because of "her reputation as the most powerful and fastest-acting saint" which is "above all what attracts results-oriented devotees to her altar."⁸⁹ Many devotees believe that "La Santa Muerte will grant your prayers -- but only in exchange for payment, and that payment must be proportional to the size of the miracle requested, and the punishment for not meeting one's debt to her is terrible."⁹⁰ The culture of reciprocity in saint veneration is apparent in the cult of Santa Muerte. The idea is that in order to get a miracle, people must make some sort of offering. Although not all of the miracles attributed to Santa Muerte are necessarily morally aligned, they are part of a system of exchange. The system of exchange is something that Bataille would argue keeps humans in discontinuity and the world of things. There have been a number of ritual sacrifices to Santa Muerte, which Bataille would say seem to have both elements of the sacred as well as oppressive elements that keep people subordinate to the real order.

⁸⁹ *Devoted to Death*, 59.

⁹⁰ Alma Guillermoprieto, "Troubled Spirits: In Mexico, the harsh realities of daily life have elevated unholy saints, who now stand beside traditional icons," *National Geographic* (May 2010) 5.

The element of reciprocity in miracle working in relation to Santa Muerte seems to have caused drug cartel members to go to extremes when asking for miracles. Robert J. Bunker in an FBI report on the cult of Santa Muerte remarks, “With the stakes so high, the sacrifices and offerings to Santa Muerte have become primeval and barbaric.”⁹¹ Because of the idea of reciprocity, many drug trafficking devotees seem to have gone to the extreme in their offerings to Santa Muerte. Bunker writes, “Rather than plates of food, beer, and tobacco, in some instances, the heads of victims (and presumably their souls) have served as offerings to invoke powerful petitions for divine intervention.”⁹² Bunker also cites an example of a car thief in Tepito Mexico who reportedly “killed virgins and babies once a year and offered them as sacrifices to Santa Muerte to gain her favor and magical protection.”⁹³ Another example is of an incident in Ciudad Juárez in 2010, in which Hillside 13 gang members burned a victim behind a house containing an altar and a small Santa Muerte statue. Later, in an interview with police the neighbors said that the killers “‘asked for something big’; as result, the perpetrators performed multiple human sacrifices.”⁹⁴ Additionally, other ritual sacrifices have also been attributed to Santa Muerte.

In 1989, police found human remains in sacrificial cauldrons and buried on the property of a Cuban-American narco named Adolfo Constanzo. Constanzo headed a band of Mexican drug traffickers in the 1980s. As part of an investigation of a missing student, “police found human remains, including those of the missing student, in sacrificial cauldrons and buried on the

⁹¹ Robert J. Bunker, “Santa Muerte: Inspired Ritualistic Killings (Part 1 of 3),” *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, Vol. 82 Issue 2, (Feb2013), 3.

⁹² “Inspired Ritual Killings (Pat 1 of 3),” 4.

⁹³ Robert J. Bunker, “Santa Muerte: Inspired Ritualistic Killings (Part 2 of 3),” *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, Vol. 82 Issue 2, (Feb2013), 1.

⁹⁴ “Inspired Ritualistic Killings (Part 2 of 3),” 2.

property” of Constanza.⁹⁵ Apparently, “Constanza and his gang practiced a deviant form of the Afro-Cuban religion Palo Mayombe mixed with Mexican occult practices.”⁹⁶ Constanza and his gang abducted and ritually sacrificed fourteen people or more on his ranch. Police found a statue of Santa Muerte among the cauldrons, skulls, daggers, and other items that they found on the ranch.⁹⁷ Although it is not clear what role she played in the ritual killings, police speculate that the killings may have been ritual sacrifices to Santa Muerte. The examples of ritualistic killings in exchange for big miracles differentiate these sacrifices from the sacrifice that Bataille says connects people to the sacred.

Bataille would say that these human sacrifices in connection to the cult of Santa Muerte are examples of people trying to return to continuity, but falling short. The drug cartel sacrifices are not examples of “useless consumption,” rather the devotees to Santa Muerte are using their sacrificial victims as tools through which they seek to gain future outcomes. They are positing the sacrifices as objects with a future outcome that they seek to obtain in exchange. Therefore, devotees to Santa Muerte are maintaining the subject-object relationship with the sacrifices. This type of sacrifice is counterproductive to bringing people closer to the sacred because it does not destroy the discontinuity of consciousness, but rather it maintains it.

Bataille’s version of sacrifice differs from the sacrifices which are associated with the devotees to the cult of Santa Muerte. Rather than destroying the victim’s utility, and therefore destroying the subject-object relationship that they have with the *thing* (victim), devotees to Santa Muerte are actually enforcing the subject-object relationship through the sacrifice.

⁹⁵ *Devoted to Death*, 97.

⁹⁶ *Devoted to Death*, 97.

⁹⁷ *Devoted to Death*, 98.

Furthermore, although continuity is experienced through a violent destruction, it is not meant to necessarily be a physical outward destruction. Devotees who are practicing the outward destruction of others in the case of the drug cartel are participating in a system that makes them continue to be subordinate to the real order.

The types of human sacrifices done by the drug cartels are strongly connected to the drug war which is a system of exchange. Human sacrifice is the ultimate expression of useless consumption of a thing. As discussed earlier, utility and the positing of objects as tools is what makes them into “things.” Bataille emphasizes that the essence of sacrifice is “internal violence.”⁹⁸ If a group were to sacrifice a slave, this would be inadequate because it would be “an extension of military combat” rather than “internal violence.”⁹⁹ If humans are to be sacrificed they must be “victims at the top who are not only the useful wealth of a people, but this people itself.”¹⁰⁰ Although violence is a means through which humans may return to intimacy with the sacred, “External violence is antithetical to sacrifice or the festival, whose violence works havoc within.”¹⁰¹ Sacrifice has to do with inner destruction rather than pure outward violent destruction. Although there is violence, there is not liberation because the humans are violent as part of a system of war, which is a system of exchange. Unlike ritual sacrifice, amorality and violence, the potentially liberating force in the form of festival is not as evident within the cult of Santa Muerte.

⁹⁸ *Theory of Religion*, 61.

⁹⁹ *Theory of Religion*, 61.

¹⁰⁰ *Theory of Religion*, 61.

¹⁰¹ *Theory of Religion*, 57.

The apparent lack of festival and orgiastic activity surrounding the cult of Santa Muerte may be an indication of the greater cultural context of Latin America and the pervasive hold that the strict Catholic mores of sexuality have on the devotees. There is no evidence of the orgiastic erotic exuberance and expression of people subverting the real order, even among the subversive drug lords who remain outside the traditional systems of the government and the institution of the Catholic Church. In many ways, devotees to Santa Muerte seem to be venerating the Bony Lady through very traditional Catholic methods.

Institutionalization: The Movement toward Destruction of the Sacred

Many of the ways in which people practice venerating Santa Muerte are direct imitations of the ways in which people venerate accepted Roman Catholic canonized saints. People bring the Bony Lady fresh flowers and “employ votive candles in essentially the traditional Catholic way.”¹⁰² Regarding the flowers, devotees are sure to follow proper altar protocol by keeping them fresh in water-filled crystal containers.¹⁰³ They are certain to keep the flowers, in addition to a bowl of water, fresh because they believe that if they do not keep the offerings fresh it will offend the saint.¹⁰⁴ There is also even a type of Holy Text with explicit directions on the proper ways to venerate Santa Muerte called *La Biblia de la Santa Muerte* (Santa Muerte Bible).¹⁰⁵ It appears as though people are creating their own form of rules and rituals surrounding the cult, which indicates that they are operating at a rational level of consciousness that maintains the order of things.

¹⁰² *Devoted to Death*, 70.

¹⁰³ *Devoted to Death*, 71.

¹⁰⁴ *Devoted to Death*, 71.

¹⁰⁵ *Devoted to Death*, 78.

Devotees have developed a set of rules and regulations for the cult, even if they are not always aligned fully with the institutional Roman Catholic Church. In worship, devotees appropriate many traditional Catholic prayers.¹⁰⁶ They offer the Bony Lady hard liquor such as tequila (rather than traditional Catholic wine) which has become an important ritual obligation.¹⁰⁷ Chesnut observed the Santa Muerte shrine in Tepito, and he describes how some devotees, “who in fulfillment of vows to the White Girl were not approaching the shrine on foot but on their knees, in the same way some Catholics arrive at the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe and other pilgrimage sites.”¹⁰⁸ Devotees are using some of the same types of expressions of devotion to Santa Muerte that they use for the veneration of the Virgin of Guadalupe. This is significant because the Virgin of Guadalupe is a symbol of the institutions and systems in that she is the patron saint of Mexico and she is also a sanctioned saint of the Catholic Church. Since devotees are venerating Santa Muerte in similar ways that they venerate the Virgin, this seems to be indicative of the routinization and ritualization of the veneration of the Bony Lady. There are also other very traditional Catholic forms of veneration that devotees are practicing.

There are now public services in honor of the cult of Santa Muerte held throughout the month in Mexico. In Tepito, weekly rosaries are led by Doña Queta. Again, these rosaries are adaptations “of the Catholic series of prayers dedicated to the Virgin.”¹⁰⁹ There is an increasing popularity of the ritual, Chesnut notes that “Doña Queta organized the first public rosaries at her

¹⁰⁶ *Devoted to Death*, 80.

¹⁰⁷ *Devoted to Death*, 73.

¹⁰⁸ *Devoted to Death*, 85.

¹⁰⁹ *Devoted to Death*, 84.

shrine in 2002 and since then the practice has proliferated throughout Mexico and increasingly in this country.”¹¹⁰ Now thousands of devotees participate in dozens of rosaries held each month throughout Mexico. In addition to this, there are masses held on a daily basis, mostly in temples started by Father Romo.¹¹¹ The temple started by Father Romo offers a full array of sacraments, including weddings, baptisms, and monthly rosaries.¹¹² The veneration and ritual practices by the devotees to Santa Muerte seem to indicate that she is becoming more and more grounded in the real order.

These services demonstrate how through the routinization and ritualization of the veneration of Santa Muerte, the institutionalization of her cult is already occurring. Bataille would say that this is evidence of the destruction of the subversive sanctity of Santa Muerte. This is because institutions make people into tools as part of a system, and therefore the devotees who participate in devotion to Santa Muerte maintain a state of discontinuity because they are participating in a system of subject-object relationships. However, without the routinization of the cult of Santa Muerte to some degree, the cult will not be sustained.

Routinization as a Means of Sustaining the Cult

Given that Santa Muerte is the personification of death and has never been attributed to a historical figure in time, what is the future of the subversive folk saint? The cult of Santa Muerte seems to be an expression of charismatic authority. Max Weber defines charisma as “a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional

¹¹⁰ *Devoted to Death*, 84.

¹¹¹ *Devoted to Death*, 89.

¹¹² *Devoted to Death*, 89.

qualities.”¹¹³ As Bataille’s theory of religion seems to indicate, Santa Muerte’s charismatic power stems from her subversive sanctity. The other key component of charismatic authority is that there are committed devotees or followers of the charismatic leader.¹¹⁴ The recognition of a charismatic leader leads people to exhibit intense personal devotion to a figure. This intense devotion to a charismatic leader has inherent anti-institutional and antinomian predispositions. People who are devoted to a charismatic leader will follow the leader’s set of rules and morality, regardless of whether or not they are aligned with the already in place institutional laws and order. Charismatic authority often leads followers to subvert traditional morality, because they create their own moral fervor based on the charismatic authority.¹¹⁵ The whole process of the disruptive force of charismatic authority is exemplified by the cult of Santa Muerte.

Similarly to Bataille’s *Theory of Religion*, Weber talks about how the charismatic fervor is rooted in a search for something that seems to be similar to lost intimacy with the sacred. S.N. Eisenstadt commenting on Weber writes, “This charismatic fervor is rooted in the attempt to come into contact with the very essence of being, to go to the very roots of existence, of cosmic, social, and cultural order, to what is seen as sacred and fundamental.”¹¹⁶ Bataille sees continuity as the return to sanctity, which he considers to be at each person’s very depths. Similarly to Bataille, Weber talks about how the search for the very depths of what is “sacred and fundamental” may “contain a strong predisposition to sacrilege: to the denial of the validity of

¹¹³ Max Weber, *Max Weber on Charisma and Institution Building: Selected Papers*, ed. by S.N. Eisenstadt (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 48.

¹¹⁴ *Charisma and Institution Building*, xviii.

¹¹⁵ *Charisma and Institution Building*, xxi.

¹¹⁶ *Charisma and Institution Building*, xix.

the sacred, and of what is accepted in any given society as sacred.”¹¹⁷ Where Weber’s and Bataille’s theories differ, is in their opinion on the routinization of the charismatic subversive sanctity.

Where Bataille would see the institutionalization of charisma or subversive sanctity as the detrimental destruction of the sacred embodied by the cult of Santa Muerte, Weber recognizes the need to balance the charismatic and the institutional. Weber claims that:

The test of any great charismatic leader lies not only in his ability to leave a continuous impact on an institutional structure—to transform any given institutional setting by infusing into it some of his charismatic vision, by investing the regular, orderly offices, or aspects of social organization, with some of his charismatic qualities and aura.¹¹⁸

Weber points out that in order for the pure charisma to be sustained, it must on some level be routinized and institutionalized.

Weber talks about how the charisma must be infused into an institution in order for it to be preserved. Pure charisma stemming from subversive sanctity is what led to the origination of the cult of Santa Muerte. However, pure charismatic authority “may be said to exist only in the process of originating.”¹¹⁹ Weber states:

If this is not to remain a purely transitory phenomenon, but to take on the character of a permanent relationship forming a stable community of disciples or a band of followers or a party organization or any other sort of political or hierocratic organization, it is necessary for the character of charismatic authority to become radically changed.¹²⁰

Bataille’s theory of religion is useful in helping us to locate the charisma of Santa Muerte in her powerful subversive sanctity. However, what is the future of the cult of Santa Muerte if it is not

¹¹⁷ *Charisma and Institution Building*, xix.

¹¹⁸ *Charisma and Institution Building*, xxi.

¹¹⁹ *Charisma and Institution Building*, 54.

¹²⁰ *Charisma and Institution Building*, 54.

sustained on some level through the routinization of her charismatic subversive sanctity? Weber would say that the subversive sanctity of the Bony Lady must be preserved on some level through the routinization of the veneration of Santa Muerte. In this aspect, Weber's theory demonstrates the limitations of Bataille's theory of religion.

Conclusion:

When we apply Bataille's *Theory of Religion* to the cult of Santa Muerte, it appears as though Santa Muerte obtains her powerfully attractive quality as the embodiment of subversive sanctity. However, the more that people try to obtain this subversive sanctity by turning to Santa Muerte, the more they destroy her power as a subversive figure. Initially, it is not the institutions themselves, rather it is the people who are collectively domesticating the sacred. By trying to integrate her into the mainstream world and posing her as a culturally acceptable saint to venerate, her devotees are destroying her most attractive quality as the embodiment of Bataille's ideal of subversive sanctity. If the cult of Santa Muerte is fully integrated into society, there is a chance that her subversive character and power to attract devotees will ultimately be completely domesticated and destroyed.

Bataille's *Theory of Religion* applied to the cult of Santa Muerte serves as an explanation for why saint making continues to occur, and why Santa Muerte as a contemporary saint is so popular. The cult of Santa Muerte is an example of the inevitable domestication of whatever people consider to be sacred once the worship becomes routinized, regulated and integrated into systems of exchange, and the insatiable desire and consequential anguish that devotees will continue to experience, because of their inability to ever continuously experience that which they identify as sacred.

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