Socio-Economic Indicators and Patron Saints of the Underrepresented: An Analysis of Santa Muerte and Jesus Malverde in Mexico

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The large number of saints within Catholicism is a characteristic feature of the religion. In particular, the largely Catholic country of Mexico is well-known for the multitude of patron saints present at all levels of social organization. A brief examination of the patron saints often turned to and revered in particular Mexican communities may be of some assistance in understanding the sociological uses of official and unofficial saints, and help to shed some light on the everyday experiences that members of these groups may face. The popularity of particular “unofficial” alternative saints in Mexico, such as Santa Muerte and Jesus Malverde, may be understood as indicators of the presence of stressful socio-economic realities in particular regions of the country today, and of the human attempt to control these uncertain situations.

A well-known feature of the Catholic religion is its collection of saints. Mexico, a country with a strong Catholic influence, is particularly known for its relationship with this particular feature of Catholicism. Not only is the Virgin of Guadalupe viewed as the national patron saint of Mexico (Wolf 1956), but cities, towns and pueblos may also have their own particular saint, a feature which is sometimes referred to as “folk Catholicism” (Ingham 1986:1-9).

Unsurprisingly, this practice of adopting a particular patron saint according to his or her attributes may even extend to much smaller spaces such as barrios or neighbourhoods (Ingham 1986:4). Given this aspect of “choice” involved in saint worship, a deeper look at the characteristics of certain saints, together with the groups who choose to worship them, may shed a greater light on not only the sociological uses of saints and the magic related to saint worship, but perhaps even on the features of daily life that these groups experience. The figures that particular social groups choose to worship may not even be fully recognized by the Catholic Church. Nonetheless, they are treated and revered in the same manner as the figures that are recognized by the Church. The popularity of particular “unofficial” alternative saints in Mexico, such as Santa Muerte and Jesus Malverde, may be understood as indicators of the presence of stressful socio-economic realities in particular regions of the country today, and of the human attempt to control these uncertain situations.

Santa Muerte and Jesus Malverde: Patron Saints of the Unaccepted and Overlooked?

It is imperative to look at the origins and characteristics of the saints under examination in order to gain a better understanding of the social groups who choose to worship these particular “alternative saints”. Translated, Santa Muerte means Saint Death, and is usually depicted as a skeleton. However, the objects she is carrying often vary; at times Santa Muerte may be carrying a scythe, while in other versions, she may be carrying a globe in one hand, balancing scales in the other, and wearing a crown (Thompson 1998:407). Death may be understood as a great equalizer; all living things, no matter their status or behaviour in life, must die. Therefore, the objects portrayed with Santa Muerte are symbols which can be
understood to indicate the great power for "justice" that she is thought to represent (Flores Martes 2009:60).

The origin of this particular figure has connections to both Spain and Pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica, representing a syncretism of religion that is clearly visible in many other traditions within Mexican Catholicism. A well-known god of the Aztec pantheon was “Mictlantecuhtli”, the god of death, who was widely worshipped in Pre-Hispanic times (Flores Martes 2009:57). Mictlantecuhtli was also often depicted as skeleton, while another goddess, Coatlicue, the Goddess of Life, Death and Rebirth, was often depicted with skull imagery and may be seen as a possible precursor to Santa Muerte (Thompson 1998:419). However, the emphasis placed on the representation of death through skeletal imagery may have Spanish origins as well. Thompson (1998) argues that the increase of skeletal imagery in Spanish history is often understood to be linked to the increased number of deaths due to the plague which ravaged regions of Europe.

A figure similar to Santa Muerte was also used in Spain prior to the conquest, primarily in love magic rituals, and this also appears to have been the most common use of Santa Muerte during the Colonial period (Thompson 1998:406). Since then however, Santa Muerte worship has expanded to satisfy many other purposes. On the surface, the worship of Santa Muerte may appear to be related to the satisfaction of desires for which many other Catholics appeal to more "sanctioned" saints to satisfy, such as the desire for love, luck, health, wealth, power or protection. However, upon closer inspection, many Santa Muerte orations are about gaining domination over other people (Thompson 1998:411). In fact, as will be discussed later, there are many different “versions” of Santa Muerte, all used for different purposes. Despite this apparent multifaceted nature of Santa Muerte, many Catholic citizens of Mexico still regard Santa Muerte as an evil figure, and the official position of the Catholic church denounces worship of her (Flores Martes 2009:67).

An examination into the regions of Mexico in which Santa Muerte experiences the greatest level of popularity, and the periods in which this popularity increases, may present an opportunity to understand more about the sociological functions of saints, such as their ability to be used as indicators of particular social situations. In the 1990s, the popularity of Santa Muerte grew significantly within particular areas of Mexico City. During this time, Mexico was experiencing an intense political and economic crisis, and as many academics would argue, a growing disillusionment with the government of Salinas de Gortari, and of many political and judicial institutions within the country (Flores Martes 2009:58). Santa Muerte's growing popularity in Mexico City during this time eventually expanded to other large urban spaces throughout the country, and importantly, to the Mexico-United States border. The correlation of the rise in popularity of Santa Muerte and the political and economic crisis may be emphasized by the fact that Santa Muerte appears to be most popular among groups that are socially marginalized, or who experience much insecurity (Flores
Martes 2009:59). Thus, it may be argued that the presence and level of popularity of Santa Muerte may be understood as an indicator of socio-economic stress.

As with most big cities, crime is a common threat in Mexico City, and particularly in certain neighbourhoods of the large urban area. Santa Muerte has often been associated with Tepito, a barrio in north-central Mexico City (Flores Martes 2009:58). From personal experience, when residents of Mexico are asked about Tepito, many mention that it is a 'lower-class' neighbourhood, and discuss its notoriety in regards to crime. In fact, more than once I was told not to venture into this part of city alone, which highlights the social instability of this particular barrio. Thus, the popularity of Santa Muerte in Tepito may be used as an example to emphasize the ability of Santa Muerte to act as an indicator of socio-economic instability or stress. The popularity of Santa Muerte along the Mexico-United States border may also be used as a similar example. The border between these two countries, much like many other borders in other parts of the world, is notorious for illegal activity with regard to trade and immigration. In particular, drug smuggling activities and illegal immigration into the United States can both be understood as 'high-risk' activities, in which survival becomes very uncertain. It is no surprise then, that Santa Muerte gains many of her devotees from the ranks of narcotraficantes, or drug-traffickers, and those hoping to cross the border illegally (Flores Martes 2009:61). Thus, the presence and popularity of Santa Muerte in “dangerous” barrios of Mexico City, and among social groups that are involved in 'high-risk' activities, may be used to demonstrate that Santa Muerte can be seen as an indicator of socio-economic stress and uncertainty.

Santa Muerte is not the only figure that may act as this type of indicator. Jesus Malverde may also work for the same purpose. Commonly referred to as the “Mexican Robin Hood” (Quinones 2002:227), there are many different tales regarding who the idolized figure of Jesus Malverde is modeled after, and what the course of his life looked like. However, there seems to be general agreement on some main characteristics. Jesus Malverde was a railway worker in Mexico, who eventually became a bandit during the Mexican Revolution (Davis 2007; Roig-Franzia 2007). During this time, he was known to steal from the rich oligarchs in the region and redistribute these stolen goods to the poor population. There is also general agreement among Malverde followers that he was eventually captured by the authorities, although the manner of death varies between execution by guns, or by hanging (Davis 2007; Quinones 2002; Roig-Franzia 2007). Although there may be different ideas about Jesus Malverde among his followers, many academics doubt whether he existed at all (Quinones 2002:227).

Regardless, whether or not Malverde actually existed does not have any impact on the faith of those who worship him; it is the legends that have perpetuated a strong belief in his supernatural powers. Much like Santa Muerte, followers of Malverde also request blessings such as protection and wealth from
this figure, though once again, it becomes imperative to look at the regions and social groups within which Malverde worship is popular. Malverde is not formally recognized by the Catholic Church, and is viewed by some Mexicans as an “evil” figure (Davis 2007:1). Despite this reputation, this figure still has a large number of self-proclaimed devotees, especially among particular social groups and in particular regions of Mexico. For example, Colonia Doctores, a neighbourhood in Mexico City known for its stolen auto parts dealers, has been explained by some as an area with many Malverde altars and a large number of devotees (Roig-Franzia 2007:1). However, Malverde may be most notorious for his role as the “narcosaint”, or the patron saint of drug traffickers in Mexico. Notably he is very popular in Sinaloa, a state which is arguably known for being the state in which drug smuggling has its roots (Price 2005:180; Quinones 2002:226). In fact, many drug runners who have been caught are seen wearing small cloth necklaces called “scapulars”, with an image of Malverde on them (Roig-Franzia 2007:1).

Although it must be noted that Malverde is commonly referred to as the “narcosaint”, to proclaim that all devotees of Malverde are involved in the drug trade would be an overgeneralization. It has been argued that in the century that has passed since Malverde’s alleged death, he became an important symbol among poor Mexicans who, frustrated with the corruption of the political and justice system of their country, may have seen crime as a form of resistance and as a strategy to defeat this repression and injustice (Roig-Franzia 2007:1). In this way, the legends of Malverde as the “Mexican Robin Hood”, and the ability to turn to him for supernatural help may have offered a glimmer of hope in an already corrupt system. Consequently, the popularity of Malverde among those involved in the drug trade, and among areas in Mexico City which are known for illegal activity, once again points to the possibility of understanding Jesus Malverde as an indicator of socio-economic stress and uncertainty. The drug trade is a highly unstable activity, where the uncertainty of life looms daily. This is also true for poverty-stricken areas of large cities which often have high crime rates, like those of Mexico City. Furthermore, the popularity of both Malverde and Santa Muerte can be understood as a way in which people may perhaps reconcile certain illegal activities with their Catholic faith; at times, the Church may be criticized for not doing enough to eradicate poverty and help marginalized groups, causing certain people to turn to alternative figures, while still allowing them to utilize traditional rituals of worship found in Catholicism, such as altars and orations (Price 2005:183). The presence and popularity of Jesus Malverde and Santa Muerte among these social groups and within these particular areas, clearly supports the argument that these figures may be understood as indicators of socio-economic stress and instability.

The Magic of Santa Muerte and Jesus Malverde

It is not only the characteristics of the saints that may be indicative of socio-
economic instability; the purposes their “powers” are used for may be useful in understanding the correlation between socio-economic stress and the presence and popularity of these saints. A popular theory regarding the function of magic in societies, posited by Malinowski, is that magic functions to alleviate anxiety in stressful and uncertain situations (Homans 1941). The use of magic by devotees of Santa Muerte and Malverde can be understood in relation to this idea. In the markets where Santa Muerte merchandise is popular, there are many different “versions” of Santa Muerte sold, and these vary according to the colour of her robe (Thompson 1998:424). These images are placed on items such as candles, amulets and incense bottles, with the hope that the use of these items will invoke the power that the particular version of Santa Muerte represents. Images of a black-robed Santa Muerte are used for killing one’s enemies, a red-robed Santa Muerte attracts a lover, a green or gold robe attracts money, a blue robe tranquilizes particular people, such as a violent spouse, and a white robe is the “benevolent” Santa Muerte, to which mothers often turn in order to bring their sons home from distant migrant jobs in the United States (Thompson 1998:425). Despite the variety of these uses, they all have one factor in common: they are all associated with situations of social or economic uncertainty. For example, it has been argued that Santa Muerte’s original purpose, as a figure of love magic, may have appeared to be “romantic” on the surface, but may really have been used by women for survival. Mexican society was, and to a large extent still is, a society controlled economically by men, and thus spells to bind a wandering man to a woman were probably used in an attempt to prevent or alleviate the socio-economic stress and uncertainty of poverty and social marginalization in this particular domain (Thompson 1998:415-416). Clearly, the use of magic by the devotees of Santa Muerte can be understood as an attempt to control the stressful and very uncertain situations in which the devotees are involved.

The magic practiced by Jesus Malverde devotees also can be related to Malinowski’s theory of magic. Much like Santa Muerte, there are many items sold with the image of Malverde on them, such as candles and small or large protective statues in the form of Malverde himself. There is a commonly reported belief that having a likeness of Jesus Malverde around, no matter the form, will render illegal drugs less noticeable to the authorities (Davis 2007:1). In fact, some people even believe that having a statue of Malverde near the drug dealer’s “stash”, will make the drugs completely invisible (Davis 2007:1). This attempt at magic may be understood as a way to increase human control over uncertain situations; the drug trade is a highly volatile activity, with huge uncertainty regarding capture and execution. The placement of Malverde statues and the wearing of Malverde amulets or “scapulars” may be understood as an attempt to assert some control over these “high-risk” situations. Thus the high popularity of Santa Muerte and Jesus Malverde in particular regions and among particular social groups can be seen not only as indicators of socio-economic stress and uncertainty, but also as...
indicators of the human attempt to gain some control over these uncertain situations.

It may not only be Santa Muerte and Malverde devotees who use magic to cope with socio-economic uncertainty, but an argument may also be made for the vendors and merchants who sell these items. For the most part, Frazer's theory of magic as erroneous reason has been disputed by many academics, but there is one part of his theory that may be useful to mention here. Frazer (1979) has argued that the business of magic attracts the quick-witted and clever-minded portion of the population. This argument may have elements of truth; John Thompson in his study of Santa Muerte, recalled that one particular market vendor in El Mercado Sonora would write new orations to Santa Muerte in between customers. This vendor had also capitalized on the different versions of Santa Muertes, and was thus constantly working on new product lines (Thompson 1998:410, 424). This may perhaps also serve to demonstrate another way by which people are attempting to assert control over uncertain situations with the use of magic, although in quite a different context. By capitalizing on the business of magic, humans are attempting to gain some control over an uncertain economic situation. It becomes clear that there is an idea of magic associated with Santa Muerte and Jesus Malverde. Therefore, the presence and popularity of these figures may not only be understood as an indicator of socio-economic uncertainty and stress, but also as proof that humans are striving to combat this uncertainty and to gain control over their social and economic situations in various ways.

**Conclusion**

Saint worship plays a large part in Mexican culture, and the study of the particular saints chosen for worship may convey important information about the individuals or social groups that choose to be devotees, as well as information regarding the situations they encounter in daily life. In this way, the study of Santa Muerte and Jesus Malverde may be extraordinarily important. Whether these saints are recognized by the Catholic Church or not does not make a difference for the legitimacy of their study; if particular social groups treat them as saints, they can be studied as saints. Furthermore, the fact that they are not officially recognized in Catholicism may lend more information about the groups and areas under study. If the Virgin of Guadalupe can be understood as the key symbol of Mexican national culture (Wolf 1956), then it may be proposed that Santa Muerte and Jesus Malverde can be understood as key symbols of those aspects of Mexican national culture that are often ignored and to some extent, unaccepted among the general population, such as social marginalization and the drug trade, respectively. In effect, Santa Muerte and Jesus Malverde may perhaps be understood as key symbols of the “underworld” and the “underdogs” of national culture. The increasingly multifaceted natures of these figures and the slowly growing acceptance among larger sectors of the population must not be ignored, but instead, may carry a message for the future. Clearly, the popularity of Santa Muerte and Jesus Malverde may be
understood as indicators of socio-economic uncertainty and stress, and of the human attempt to control these situations. Furthermore, in the present global atmosphere of increasing fear and violence, and with the growing disillusionment with many forms of governing, the growing popularity of such “alternative” figures as these does not come as a surprise. In a society where uncertainty and fear governs lives, a most attractive option may be to look towards these alternative, “unofficial” figures and cling to the defiance that they represent, while silently saying orations in hope of gaining control over our uncertain and unstable lives.

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