

Lady Death and the Pluralisation of Latin American Religion

Podcast with **R. Andrew Chesnut** (31 October 2019).

Interviewed by **David McConeghy**

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at:

<http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/lady-death-and-the-pluralisation-of-latin-american-religion/>

David McConeghy (DMcC): *Welcome. I am [David McConeghy](#), and today I'm joined by [Dr R. Andrew Chesnut](#), holder of the Bishop Walter F. Sullivan Chair and Professor of Religious Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University. A Latin American specialist, Professor Chesnut is the author of numerous articles and five books, including his latest – [Devoted to Death: Santa Muerte, the Skeleton Saint](#) – which is the first and only academic study in English of the folk saint of death. Dr Chesnut is a regular commentator on news and religious affairs and writes a blog for Patheos, called [The Global Catholic Review](#). Dr Chesnut, thanks so much for joining us today. It's a real pleasure to speak with you.*

R. Andrew Chesnut (AC). Oh it's my pleasure. Thanks so much for the invitation, Dr McConeghy.

DMcC. *One of the things that I'm really excited about in your work is that you – especially for American audiences – really let us into an entire world that the Global South is participating in, and that is thriving in Latin America. I think here in the US, and perhaps in Europe – our two major audiences, the folks that listen to us – we need some orientation. We need some help, really understanding what's going on in the areas that you study. So can you say a little bit about your research, and the kind of questions that really drive your focus in Latin America?*

AC: Yes. I really started as a specialist in Pentecostalism in Latin America; more specifically, Brazil.

My book, [Born Again in Brazil](#), which was published in 1997, was the first book in English on the

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Pentecostal movement in Brazil. And over two decades later, it's still very relevant as today, Brazil is home to the largest Pentecostal population on Earth – larger than even here, in the United States – and who were integral in electing Brazilian President [Bolsonaro](#). After that I moved on. It was very obvious to me, as I was doing my field research in Brazil and the Amazonian city of Belém, that there was intense religious competition taking place among the three major religious groups of Brazil: Pentecostals, Catholics, and the Afro-Brazilian religious groups such as [Umbanda](#) and [Candomblé](#) – the two most important ones. So for my second book, [*Competitive Spirits: Latin America's New Religious Economy*](#), I look at the religious competition taking place in Latin America, through the theoretical paradigm of religious economy – in which you kind-of look at faith institutions competing with each other, much in the same way that commercial enterprises do in the commercial economy. And so I focussed on those religious groups, who in the past century have had the most success in terms of attracting membership. And that would be the Pentecostals, and the Catholic Charismatic renewal – which is the Catholic Church's own version of Pentecostalism – has been thriving in Latin America and the Global South, as its response to stiff Pentecostal competition. And again, looking at the religions of the African diaspora I also observed [Haitian Vodou](#) and Cuban [Santería](#). And then I moved on. As you mentioned, my latest work is on what is now the fastest growing new religious movement in the entire West. Mexican folk saint, [Santa Muerte](#), which translates in English both as Saint Death and Holy Death. Unfortunately, [Pew Research](#) hasn't stepped in or Gallup poll, so we don't have any hard numbers. But after a decade of research, I estimate some ten-to-twelve million Santa Muerte devotees, mostly concentrated in Mexico, Central America and here in United States. So, I don't know, I'd say if there's one major or two major connecting threads, in my two decades of research, first would be the paramountcy of faith healing. My main argument that the motor driving the Pentecostal boom in Brazil and Latin America is its emphasis on faith healing. I found that so many nominal Catholics had converted at the time of an acute health crisis, which they weren't able to solve through the Catholic Church or through secular health care either. And so the Pentecostal Churches always kind of put faith healing: “Accept Jesus as your Lord and Saviour, be baptised by the Holy Spirit and this will cure your affliction of poverty” (5:00). And so that, I really find to be kind-of the motor that's been propelling the Pentecostal boom in Latin America and the Global South. And I was so surprised when I started my research on Santa Muerte in 2009, that also a key component of her appeal, both in Mexico and here in the United States, is her role as a [curandera](#) or faith healer. So many people come to her major shrines in Mexico, either giving thanks for a healing they believe that she performed for them or for a family member, or asking her for that. And so that was just one of the

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great surprises in my research. Who was going to imagine that this fierce looking death saint is also a potent healer as well? So this kind of thread of the great importance of faith healing has been a commonality in my two decades of research, as is my primary focus, really, that's been on lived religion – religion as it's played out in the grassroots, in terms of rites and rituals – and (I've been) much less interested in the written word, and dogma, and doctrine in my focus.

DMcC: *This is a really interesting way to think about your work. One of the questions that I already had for you – and I've been engaging with your work, Born Again in Brazil, for some time – talking about the kind of charismatic exchanges between groups like the [New Apostolic Reformation](#), and folks in Guatemala or Brazil. On those kinds of things, you really frame it as a solution to the health crisis of poverty. And it sounds as if, twenty years later – this is an amazing thing to say – twenty years later, you still think that's true!*

AC: Yes, I make the same argument. And especially, as I throw in, since [prosperity theology](#) has essentially become hegemonic theology among Pentecostals, and many Evangelicals across the Americas. And, as we see, it's kind-of the unofficial theology of the Trump administration here.

DMcC: *Right. Absolutely.*

AC: So I'd throw in the element of prosperity, which wasn't as prevalent when I initiated my research – what, twenty-five years ago? But yes, the health component is still, I'd say, the *sine qua non* of Pentecostalism's appeal in Latin America and the Global South. And even here, in the United States. You know the great pioneering Pentecostal televangelist, [Oral Roberts](#), who brought the message on TV for the first time in the United States: really the crux of his message was faith healing, as well. [Benny Hinn](#), as well. So the whole prosperity element of it gets so much attention lately, but we can't forget the other part of the equation.

DMcC: *Do you think that part of this is sales pitch for the shift, maybe, from stronger Catholicism that was not charismatic, to the rising Pentecostals, and then Catholic competition in charismatic spaces? That that framework is really only exposed through the kind of lived experience stuff that you work on? You suggested that perhaps the written stuff is less crucial for the way that you think about things. But, when I think of the Pentecostal orientation to what's important: “Show me the power”, right? “Show me a thing that will have results and that will connect me to the power of the Holy Spirit.” It will do that immediately. It will do it vibrantly. It will do it within my community. It will do it*

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day in, day out. Is that part of the mix, there, that kind of “We’re making really strong claims about what the religious adoption of this can do for you”? And then, collectively, the power of that choice brings . . . the rising tide lifts all boats on that.

RAC: Yes, no doubt, at the macro level. Particularly that emphasis on access and demonstrating the power of the Holy Spirit, needs to be physically manifest, right? And so thus the Pentecostal emphasis, particularly in Latin America, of constructing monumental temples, for being seen with presidents and governmental authorities (**10:00**). Such as I think is poignantly the case with billionaire Pentecostal Bishop [Edir Macedo](#), who has become one of *the* most visible and prominent backers of the Brazilian president, Bolsonaro. And who recently had him attend one of his Sunday worship services in San Paolo and gave him a five minute blessing, which you can see on [YouTube](#). It's pretty extraordinary! So yes, at the macro level, there needs to be physical representations and manifestations of the power. And, particularly if we're talking about the ascendant prosperity theology, you know, that Pentecostal pastors themselves need to be paragons of prosperity – so, the ostentatious display of their prosperity in terms of their choice of vehicles, and their houses, and the temples themselves. So yes, it's not only at the grass roots, it's not only lived religion, it's also the institution. That just tends to be my focus less, but I'm not saying that it's a less interesting or valid focus.

DMcC: *So in the last two decades you kind-of highlighted that prosperity has really taken root. Can you talk a little bit more, for any of the Listeners that may not be familiar with the background, especially of Brazil? I know that many centuries of Catholic dominance there really started to shift mid-twentieth century, with the growth of Pentecostalism there. But then there's also this backdrop of West African and syncretic kind of openness. And that configuration is so unique, not only in Brazil, but in each country in Latin America, and the way that they do it. Can you talk just little bit about that? The blending that they do so well?*

AC: Yes. I think Brazil is particularly fascinating as a country of over two hundred million people, and such diversity! It's kind-of the country that most mirrors the United States, and is most similar, really – the religious economy – to the United States. So yes, historically of course, like all Latin American countries, it's a Catholic country. And at the end of the nineteenth century, you had the disestablishment of the Catholic Church from the Brazilian State. Which, of course, sets the legal foundation for . . . not for Afro-Brazilian religions, but the legal foundation for Protestants to start setting up their chapels. And indeed, at that time in the nineteenth Century, you have some of the

major US-based mainline denominations going down to Brazil: Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists,

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etc. They have very little success in converting Brazilian Catholics. But they do have success in setting up prep schools and universities and such. And then, building on this new legal foundation – at least for Protestants to set up shop – Pentecostals arrive in 1910-1911, and find really quick success in converting Brazilian Catholics. To the point that we already start to have a critical mass of converts by the mid-twentieth century, by the 1950s. And Pentecostalism really starts to mushroom in the 1970s and really has been growing like wildfire for the past five decades or so. Talking about the Afro-Brazilian religions . . . and I should say I need to make this so clear. Of the twelve million African slaves who were forcibly brought to our Americas, forty-three percent go to Brazil. In comparison only three percent come here, to the United States. So anybody with any interest in matters of the African diaspora, be it religion or any other facet, by necessity has to take a look at Brazil, if not start with Brazil, because of the sheer numbers. And so it's no surprise that Brazil is the place – maybe with the exception of Haiti – Brazil is the place where today we have the most vibrant religions of the African diaspora, which historically were repressed, suppressed by both Brazilian church and state, and really only are legalised in the late 1960s (**15:00**). And today, and again the two main ones are Umbanda and Candomblé. And today they're thriving – however, they're facing a new round of [persecution by Pentecostals](#), particularly in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, where Pentecostal gangsters raid their houses of worship and try to drive them out of their zones of influence. And so this is another kind of fascinating development. Never, twenty-five years ago, did I imagine that I'd be writing articles about armed Pentecostal gangsters in Rio de Janeiro, who are the agents of persecution and harassment of practitioners of Candomblé and Umbanda!

DMcC: *When you tweeted out your latest post on that from Patheos, it exploded on my timeline! It got retweeted so much. Clearly, I think, the rest of us share that surprise – that this is one of the configurations that we're seeing, right now.*

AC: It's surreal. We're living in surreal times across the board, though!

DMcC: *So if we can take that kind-of grass-roots activism that's happening: one access point from your current research on that is really the broad appeal of Santa Muerte. Can you tell us a little bit about why it is that this really potent symbol is connected to health, and love, and money, and drugs, and crime and cartels?! How did we get from a folk saint to narco-cartels, Pentecostals attacking Afro-Brazilian religious groups? It's such a stunning transformation!*

AC: Yes. That's a big question. Let me think about where I should start with that! So Santa Muerte

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goes back to Spanish colonial times, in Mexico, and really is the syncretism or fusion of the Spanish Grim Reapress. And I say Grim Reapress because in Mediterranean Europe, Spain, Portugal, Italy, more often than not it was a female representation. The Spanish Catholic Church puts over the figure of the Grim Reapress as a tool of evangelisation of the indigenous people, here in the Americas. Because of course, in the beginning, they have no idea who the indigenous people are. They're not in the Bible. Are they humans are they animals? Do they have their own religion? So the Spanish Catholic Church brings in the Grim Reapress to represent death. And of course, for the Europeans, the Grim Reaper was a mere artistic representation or rendition of death that arises during the great death and dying of the Black Plague of the fourteenth century. Europeans did not venerate or worship the Grim Reaper, or repress and imbue him or her with any supernatural powers. And so it's the case that the Grim Reapress comes over here, for example, as part of Holy Week processions, representing the good death, the holy death of Christ. And again, one of the English translations of Santa Muerte's name is Holy Death, referring to the holy death of Christ. And so it's the case that some of the indigenous groups in Mexico, Guatemala, Argentina, Paraguay – because there's two other skeletal death saints which I'll mention in a minute – interpret the Grim Reapress through their own pre-existing religious contexts, in which the Aztecs, and the Mayans, and the (audio unclear) in South America, had their own death deities, their own death gods and goddesses, such as the Aztec [Mictēcacihuātl](#), which presided over what used to be the Aztec month of the dead – which, of course, the Spanish Catholic Church collapsed into the present two [Days of the Dead](#). So anyway, she's the syncretism of this indigenous belief in death deities and the Grim Reapress. She goes off the historical record in 1797, and only resurfaces a century-and-a-half later, in the 1940s, when American anthropologists report her for the first time on the Pacific coast of [Oaxaca](#), interestingly among Afro-Mexicans (20:00). And, from the 1940s to the 1980s, we have both American and Mexican anthropologists starting to find mostly females, Mexican females, dressed in black, venerating, Santa Muerte. By the time we get to the 1980s, across the Mexican Republic. But during this time, our anthropologist friends were reporting her working only one type of magic, and that is love magic. And so, at the mid-century, the only type of miracle that she is recorded performing is love sorcery – mostly for aggrieved Mexican women who believe their husbands or boyfriends are cheating on them. And so they petition Santa Muerte to take her over-sized scythe, and to cut out the other woman from their husband's path and to bring that husband, that badly behaving man, back home – humbled at her feet, under the threat of Santa Muerte's scythe, to never be adulterous once again.

DMcC: *That's a terrifying image!*

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AC: It is! And so her origins, at least in the twentieth century – and last time I checked and when I did the research for my book, *Devoted to Death*, her number one selling coloured votive candle was the red candle, not of blood and death, but of the heart: of love and passion. And indeed, still one of her premier roles is as love doctor, or love sorceress. At some point in the late eighties she starts to become associated with organised crime, to the point that today – you've probably seen some of my [writing](#) along with my colleague and research partner Dr [Kate Kingsbury](#) – where she's been labelled a “narco-saint”. And, in fact, that was the catalyst of my own interest, is when the [Filipe Calderón](#) administration ordered the Mexican army, in March 2009, to go onto the border with California and Texas and to demolish some forty Santa Muerte shrines. When I saw that I thought . . . I knew about Santa Muerte, because I'd been going to Mexico since the early 1980s, but I had no idea that she had been fingered as the religious enemy number one of the Mexican government, at that point. And so . . .

DMcC: *Right. If the Mexican Government is issuing statements calling for disruption of roadside temples by bulldozer, you know you've really got something on your hands!*

AC: Exactly. So we just [published with Patheos](#) yesterday about these narco-saints. And so, one of Santa Muerte's roles is as protectress of cartel members, protecting them from harm, from rival cartel members, law enforcement. But obviously since she's a folk saint and she's amoral – she's not a Catholic saint – they also ask her to eliminate or bring harm to their rivals, as well. And so that's another important role that she plays – but one of many.

DMcC: *Right. One of the things that struck me about it, and I work with far more American stuff, is the work on Saint Jude, for instance, where we really see the lived experience of the relationship of Catholics with their saint of choice as revealing all of the kind-of issues that really matter to a person, and really how it builds their whole world out from the saint, organising the perspectives about it. I think it's really interesting if Santa Muerte starts off as love . . . the avenging angel for infidelity. We don't have to work too hard, to draw a line to the cartels, mentally, if we think of the protection of secrecy, right? The protection of the sphere where cartel members are not wanting to talk about their activities, and then avenging those that break that silence, or that are working against them? It's not a hard road: (25:00) the passion that the scythe brings to the unfaithful husband is the same passion that cartel members hope that she'll bring to the enemies of the cartel. Is that the kind of way that we should think about it, or is something else going on, do you think?*

AC: Right, I think so – particularly since most Catholic saints tend to specialise in one or two types of

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miracles, such as Saint Anthony will help you find your lost keys or cell phone. And so, very quickly, Santa Muerte morphs from this exclusive focus on love sorcery to, today, being a multi-tasking saint who does it all. So, yes, she covers all bases and that's part of her appeal, as well. Not only that she covers . . . And going back to her coloured votive candles – which was the schema for the way I organised my book – she has a seven power rainbow coloured candle for those folks who are looking for a miracles on multiple fronts! Which are a lot of people, right?

DMcC: *Yes, aren't we all?*

AC: And particularly, we can't ignore the fact that devotion to Santa Muerte has mushroomed during a time of great death and dying – of bad death, juxtaposed to her name Holy Death – in Mexico. In the last decade, the only country that surpasses Mexico on violent death is another country where I have relatives, Syria. And so we're well over two hundred thousand violent deaths in Mexico in the past ten years. And so, I'm not making that one-to-one correlation in the mushrooming rise. But there's no doubt that this hyper-violence of the interminable drug war creates fertile soil. Because there's a lot of folks who ask her for more life, for more grains of life in that hour glass that she holds, in addition, again, to narcos asking her to cut the life down from their rivals, as well. And so that a saint of death should become so popular in a Mexico of such bad death, in the past ten-to-fifteen years, is of little surprise.

DMcC: *You've written about a lot of other folk saints as well, like the [Our Lady of Oxum](#), the Black Madonna. Should we be – as Religious Studies observers of folk practice and lived experience – should we be paying far more attention to the kind of constellation of major figures? I think you rightly point that Santa Muerte's rise reveals how hard it is sometimes for Religious Studies scholars to address the rapid rise of a new religious movement, a new religious emphasis, a new religious symbol. It takes us a long time to catch on to what's on the ground, to do the research, to publish the research, to have the conversations that really kind-of unpack everything. And what I've been really pleased about, every time I see something coming across on Patheos, is how vibrant it all seems. Everything is new to me about this, being a non-specialist in the area. Do you feel like more of this is needed, that we need to pay attention to more of these things, in all the places that we can find them?*

AC: Yes. I think what you're pointing at is And I'm also a big fan of paying attention to macro trends. In fact, I was a lead academic consultant on the landmark Pew survey of the [Latin American religious landscape](#) that came out in 2014. So I paid attention to macro trends as well. So one of the

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great . . . the greatest trend in Latin America, on a religious landscape, in the past four or five decades is pluralisation. And whereas for four centuries one's religious identity was inherited or bequeathed, Catholicism now, for many folks – as it is the United States – it's elected, it's chosen. And so, you know, there's Mexicans who are finding Santa Muerte is far more appealing – far more, let's say, efficacious than certain Catholic saints – and so they go that route. New Age beliefs are also very prevalent in Latin America. And so it's a diversification, it's a pluralisation. And indeed, just like in the United States, one of the fastest growing groups are the religious “nones”: those who have no institutional religious affiliation (30:00). The last [Pew Survey](#) shows that, here in the United States, the religious nones are up to twenty six percent, which means there are six percent more of them than there are Catholics, because Catholics are down to twenty percent in the United States. And in Latin America it's about fifteen percent, and exceedingly higher among Latin American millennials and Generation Z as well. So Santa Muerte and all of these other folk saints I would just put under this big tent of pluralisation, of the kind of robust diversification and religious choices that we've had for a long time in our own country.

DMcC: *It's really interesting to think about that as a kind of great awakening that's happening in Brazil, right? The voluntary-ism of America, that we tend to associate with the development of multiple Protestant denominations, really, in my mind, is the kind of language that I'm hearing you talk about with that, to hear the pluralisation of religious impulses there. But also, the nones really surprises me too. I heard a talk recently by one of Pew Forum's head researchers and like you, he highlighted that the nones are growing basically, in the US, at about one percent per year. Catholics are down to twenty-one percent now. But he cited that globally, when you talk about that, that's not what we're seeing. I'm hearing a little pushback from you that Brazil, in its parallels with the US, is actually . . .*

AC: Yes. I hate to contradict my associates at Pew, but I just saw the other day on Twitter, that in the Arab world we're seeing significant rise over the last decade of religious nones as well. So there's a hemispheric-wide trend from Canada, down to Argentina, and the United States. Western Europe, of course, was the one who really pioneered secularisation. In fact, all the sociological models of secularisation that arose in the seventies and the eighties were mostly based on the Western European experience. Peter and his associates. So, yeah, we have evidence that in other parts of the world – namely, lately, the Arab world – it's happening as well. So it's not only peculiar to our own Americas here.

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DMcC: *I don't know that those are necessarily contradictory. I think what it tells us is that the situation is changing so rapidly right now, that data that's even a few years old – if you're thinking of data from 2010, right? We're off by many percentage points now, in that data. And when you're talking on a global scale you run into huge problems. I always tell my students, when we're talking about China, that as far as I can tell and based on the work of other experts, the survey data that we have on religion in China is basically useless. When there's a global survey about what religion is like in China, that billion people in China is not being reflected by that data very well at all. And I think we see that in sub-Saharan Africa, where we're talking about the rise of Islam alongside the rise of Catholicism and Pentecostalism. And at the same time, if there's a secular movement – it's all happening all at once! I don't know that the broadness of the data is there yet, and it may take us decades to sort this out. Which, I guess, I'm thankful for – because hopefully it will keep us all busy and in business, right?*

AC: (Laughs) Right, right. Thanks to Pew in particular, right?

DMcC: *Yeah. Absolutely. So we've been talking a little bit in the last few minutes about this meta approach. One of the things you said right at the start of our conversation today, was a comparison between President Bolsonaro and maybe some of the current American politics that are going on. In a recent interview with [Bradley Onishi](#) that I did, he said similar things to a [Patheos post](#) that you posted, with Dr [Ana Keila Mosca Pinez](#), about how Brazilian Pentecostals are seeing President Bolsonaro as the Messiah, or as a messiah. (35:00) Can you talk a little bit more about the parallels between how Brazilian Pentecostals and Catholics are religiously relating to their leaders like Bolsonaro, and how, maybe for audiences in the US, that might be resembling the American evangelical relationship to Trump.*

AC: Oh yes. There's a really amazing parallel there. Again, just as white evangelicals are a major religious political constituency of president Trump, Pentecostals are that for Bolsonaro and Brazil. We know that overall about seventy percent of Brazilian evangelicals voted for Bolsonaro. I don't think we have precise data specifically on Pentecostals. But one has to remember that about seventy-five percent of all Protestants in Brazil are specifically Pentecostals, so there's no doubt that Bolsonaro would have received over eighty percent of the Pentecostal vote. And in the United States, actually sixty-one percent of white Catholics voted for Trump. I still think he has majority support, although I have seen it declining. Maybe fifty-one, fifty-two percent. And so we see that same convergence of more conservative Catholics allied with Pentecostals in Brazil, and supporting Bolsonaro. Bolsonaro

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recently was baptised by an Assembly of God pastor, in the River Jordan. And he definitely hangs around and kind-of identifies Evangelical. But historically he's been a conservative Catholic. Anyway, so he has the support of many Brazilian conservative Catholics who very much oppose Pope Francis's agenda on the Amazon, the [Amazon Synod](#) that's taking place right now. So there's just the Christian Zionism that I've written about, too, is just as important in Brazil for Pentecostals as it is for white Evangelicals. And so I think Brazil under Bolsonaro . . . He's also in the process of probably moving their embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, as well. Some of the major Pentecostal pastors in Brazil, such again as billionaire Edir Macedo, actually sometimes dress up in rabbinical vestments and cut rabbinical figures more than they do Protestant pastors! And so, yeah. There's just a great kind-of parallel taking place politically and religiously between the two giants of the hemisphere these days – Brazil and the United States.

DMcC: *Keeping on our kind of current timeliness issue: you said, before we began recording today, that with Halloween coming up – we're recording in mid-October here, All Saints Day and especially Day of the Dead – that there are actually a lot of really interesting things going on right now, connecting a lot of these themes. The next few weeks are going to be pretty interesting. I heard you say that you were headed down to Mexico for the Day of the Dead. Can you tell us about that? And maybe what you're hoping to do?*

AC: Yes. My current research project focuses on Catholic death culture. So I'm looking at things like Day of the Dead, relics, some of the [memento mori](#) that you see in Europe. But specifically, since we're on the eve of Day of the Dead, this is what I'm kind of most immediately working on. And it's also related to my previous work on Santa Muerte, in that one of the major trends in Santa Muerte devotion of the past five years is for devotees to integrate the Mexican Death Saint into their commemorations of Day of the Dead. In fact it's become so popular and so controversial that, annually, the Catholic Church in Mexico issues admonitions for parishioners not to do that, because Santa Muerte is satanic. Honouring your departed loved ones is one thing, but bringing in this heretical Death Saint is quite another. So please keep her out of your commemorations. But I should say, at his point, Santa Muerte has no official annual feast day. But if she ever does in the future, it probably will be November 2nd, the Day of the Dead. Because, again, before the Spanish conquest and colonisation (40:00), it was the Aztecs had this roughly “month of the dead”, roughly corresponding to our August, presided over by Aztec death goddess, Mictēcacihuātl – who many Mexican Santa Muerte devotees see Santa Muerte, really, as the latest kind of incarnation, or reincarnation of.

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DMcC: *That's so interesting!*

AC: And so it's like I knew that, since I wrote the first academic book in English on Santa Muerte, that it would probably hard to move onto a new topic. And so here again, in Day of the Dead, we see that nexus with Santa Muerte as well: again, me having trouble moving beyond the Death Saint

DMcC: *I don't know that we should ever apologise when we find something . . . such a rich topic, that connects to so many issues in so many different ways: from immigration, to cartels, to love, to the kind of syncretism that we're seeing, to politics, it's such a multifaceted area.*

AC: It is, yes. For example my research partner, Dr Kingsbury, is now focussing on her appeal to women and how she's kind of a defender and protectress of vulnerable women. Because, I didn't mention it, but, in addition to the narco-violence besetting Mexico, there's also an epidemic of femicide as well. And so some of these women who are at risk, look to Santa Muerte as a fierce protectress, to protect them from the predatory men. So that's a whole 'nother angle that I didn't really look into in *Devotees of Death*, that Dr Kingsbury is moving forward with.

DMcC: *I can't wait. I will reach out immediately, so that we can hear the second half of the new story here. One of the things that I've really been impressed by, is how collaborative your work is. And as we wrap up here, I'd love to hear about your thoughts about collaboration as a scholar, and what you see as the kind of challenges and benefits of doing that scholarship in a collaborative way. Because I really do think that you and Dr Kingsbury, together, have a special kind of public relationship that feeds off one another, and produces really interesting work. Can you share with us what that's like?*

AC: Yes. For me it's been very strange because up until I recently started collaborating with her, I had mostly just flown solo. I can't even think of any other co-authored . . . at least, academic journal articles that I have. All my books were my own, single-authored books. So, yeah, this has been new to me and has taken me by surprise, because our particular collaboration is so easy and seamless. And that, ironically, had been one of the reasons why maybe I had shied away from collaboration: imagining it being difficult, and time consuming, and everything. But yeah. We have great intellectual and academic chemistry, and so everything we do together is as easy as me writing on my own. And so I think both of us have just been fortunate with that. Because one can imagine that, you know, you're not going to have that rapport with everybody to facilitate that. But it's been wonderful, because

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with Patheos, I'll just say, or she'll say, "I'll take this, and you take that" and it all comes together. And she's British, so at first I was like "OK. So what do we do about our British vs American English?" But we just leave our respective versions of the English language alone and nobody seems to be bothered by that.

DMcC: *We run into that frequently at the Religious Studies Project, too! When the emails come from our British founders, Chris and David. You know it's all the 's's and when we're replying back it's all the 'z's. You just have to roll with it, right?*

AC: Exactly. Well, the good thing for me is, she's in Canada. So it's kind of up to her to assimilate to our New World English, right?! (45:00)

DMcC: *Right. You're pulling the rug right out from under the English language there. It's been so wonderful to talk to you, today. I really do appreciate your time, and I hope that all of our Listeners have enjoyed hearing about this really thriving area of research. And if they wanted to find you on Patheos, what's the name of the Blog that they should head to?*

AC: Yes. It's the [Global Catholic Review](#).

DMcC: *Perfect.*

AC: And in addition, I also run a [Santa Muerte blog](#) with my research partner, [David Metcalfe](#). And it's called the Skeleton Saint. And it's like in its seventh year. And it's the only impartial blog out there, that covers Santa Muerte news.

DMcC: *And if folks wanted to find you on Twitter, where you are extremely active and always posting interesting things, what should they look for?*

AC: I'm @AndrewChesnut1. Number 1.

DMcC: *Perfect. Well, thank you so much for your time, and have a great day.*

AC: Thank you for having me. I really appreciate it, Dr McConeghy.

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