

Article

# Santa Muerte as Emerging Dangerous Religion?

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**Abstract:** Santa Muerte is one of the fastest growing folk saint movements in Mexico. She has a core following in Mexico among dispossessed populations, but also devotees from a broader swath of the Mexican population. This article analyzes the development of Santa Muerte veneration in Mexico since 2000. I argue that, from a structural analysis perspective, Santa Muerte veneration is on the threshold of designation and treatment as dangerous religion, although its eventual status remains contingent. The movement's status will be determined by three interacting factors: (1) a core membership of outsider and dispossessed populations; (2) symbolic and social organization in a form that challenges the legitimacy and authority of the institutions of church and state; and (3) institutional control measures that contest the legitimacy of its symbolic presentation and organizational practices. I suggest several alternative developmental scenarios based on these factors.

**Keywords:** Santa Muerte; folk saint; church; state; religion

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In Western societies hosting a diversity of religious traditions, religious groups may be arrayed on a continuum from most to least legitimate. A group's location along this continuum is determined by the group's alignment with the dominant institutional order [1,2]. A high level of alignment reflects isomorphism with the symbolic and organizational logic of the dominant social institutions (governmental, economic, educational, media, social control, familial, religious) [3]. Thus, those religious groups most closely aligned with the dominant institutional order constitute the most legitimate form of religious expression in the host social order (traditionally, Roman Catholicism in Mexico and mainline Protestantism in the United States). From this perspective, religious status is the product of a claim that religious groups present, implicitly or explicitly, and that other institutional actors affirm or contest. The outcome of the adjudication of the religious status claim defines the niche the group occupies.

To state that a group exhibits a lower degree of alignment with the dominant institutional order, is to assert that the group offers a challenge/challenges of some type and that there has been successful resistance to those challenges. Challenges may be cultural/symbolic, social/organizational, or both. Alternative symbolic logics may or may not be inherently challenging; they may be regarded as quixotic, unworkable, fantastical, misguided, or even deranged. Direct challenges to core values are more threatening, but, even here, often do not provoke the same level of active control strategies unless there is some evidence of an associated program of action. Likewise, organizational practices may be regarded as unconventional, unorthodox, irregular, improper, or reckless; however, practices that appear to lack plan and purpose do not necessarily provoke active control strategies. It is when alternative symbolic logics are deemed to be systematic principles that directly challenge core principles of the dominant institutional order *and* they are paired with systematic organization to act in furtherance of the alternative symbolic agenda that the threat level grows. The threat level is highest when symbolic principles and corresponding organizational practices are sacralized. Under these conditions, the religious organization is claiming a moral status that equals or surpasses that of the dominant institutional order and that creates a moral imperative in support of the group's doctrines and practices. It is at this juncture that labels identifying dangerous religion (such as heretical, seditious,

subversive, treasonous, demonic) are most likely to be invoked and control measures (symbolic degradation, invocation of institutional sanctions, enactment of targeted legal measures) initiated.

Emerging religious movements may originate in a variety of social locations [4]. The common source of movement emergence is tension or dislocation in some niche within the social order. It is this dislocation that creates a potential participant base for emerging movements. Movements that form at the grassroots level by social “outsiders” are particularly troubling to social control agencies, given that their moral status is already contested and that the initial organization is often inchoate as a proto-movement [5–7]. If there is a large movement base and the group becomes visible rather suddenly, as occurred with the Falun Gong in China, for example, the perceived threat level may be very high [8].

Like challenges from emerging religious movements, social control responses vary. Organized control responses are likely to be mobilized when established institutions conclude that their authorized missions are at risk and when those institutions possess sanctioning authority and internal cohesiveness. Control initiatives are most effective when institutional alliances are formed that allow coordinated action. Competing institutional priorities or interests diminish the viability of control campaigns. Again, like emerging movement challenges, control campaigns may involve symbolic and/or social action. The strongest campaigns invoke a combination of delegitimizing symbols and suppressive control measures.

I shall argue that status as dangerous religion is likely to eventuate when the group at issue (1) has a core membership of outsider and dispossessed populations that faces serious social dislocation; (2) constructs symbolic and social organization in a form that challenges the legitimacy and authority of the institutions of church and state; and (3) meets institutional control measures that contest the legitimacy of the group’s symbolic presentation and organizational practices. I draw on the case of Santa Muerte veneration in Mexico since 2000 to illustrate the logic of the argument that, from a structural analysis perspective, Santa Muerte veneration has moved toward, and is on the threshold of, designation and treatment as dangerous religion. Of course, one important implication of this line of argument is that the current status of Santa Muerte remains subject to change based on developments within its support base, organization, and control measures by institutional actors. Santa Muerte’s longer-term status, therefore, remains contingent and yet to be determined. Using a combination of scholarly analyses, media reports, and statements and documents from church and state officials, I suggest several potential developmental scenarios.

### 1. Santa Muerte as Ordinary Folk Saint

The history of Santa Muerte veneration suggests that, until recently, there was little that was surprising or extraordinary in her folk saint career.

- Consistent with much folk religion, it is likely that contemporary Santa Muerte is a syncretic blend of several traditions. As Whittington notes ([9], p. 99), “Santa Muerte’s evolution from the ancient world to the present did not leave a linear, definitively traceable trail; instead, a variety of tales, folk-saint predecessors, and elements of indigenous, European, and Mexican religious traditions blend in various ways, sometimes with geographical or social variations, to comprise Santa Muerte as she is currently represented.”
- As is the case for many folk religions, Santa Muerte visibility has varied through history. Whatever Santa Muerte’s ultimate origins, she went underground following Spanish military conquests in Latin America. In Mexico, there are eighteenth century colonial records of veneration of Santa Muerte in local villages, but then she seems to disappear until the Second World War era [10,11]. Even then, Santa Muerte veneration remained largely private and covert. It was only in 2001, when Enriqueta Romero, popularly known as Doña Queta, placed a life-size Santa Muerte statue on the sidewalk outside her home in Tepito, an underclass barrio known for its open-air markets and criminal activity, that Santa Muerte veneration began to surge, with devotees currently

estimated at 10,000,000–12,000,000 and devotional items outselling the wares associated with most other folk saints [12].

- Santa Muerte is merely one in a pantheon of folk saints who are widely venerated all across Mexico [13]. While she is not the incarnation of an actual person, this also is not extraordinary among folk saints. Perhaps her most unique quality is being female, a rarity among the pantheon of male folk saints in Mexico.
- Folk saints are independent entities, and often competitors; devotees may venerate several simultaneously or switch allegiances freely. Indeed, Santa Muerte exemplifies this faddish quality, as she entered an already crowded field of folk saints and quickly outpaced most of her competitors, with the exception, of course, of Our Lady of Guadalupe, the “Queen of Mexico”. At the same time, Santa Muerte is feeling the heat from St. Jude, who emerged as a vigorous competitor who may be gaining devotees at Santa Muerte’s expense [14].
- Santa Muerte’s striking visual representation is often misinterpreted. The veneration of death is not unusual in Latin America (or some other parts of the world) and does not carry menacing connotations. As Metcalfe points out, “On a personal level, death becomes an image of rebirth and renewal.... For a nation with such striking disparities between rich and poor, death also becomes the great equalizer.... As they say in Mexico, ‘death is just and even-handed for everyone since we will all die’. For many, this unalterable truth provides a strong reason to celebrate life while there is still time” [15].
- Many folk saints (such as Gaucho Gill and Jesus Malverde) are oppositional, “anti-hero” figures, but they have not aroused intense opposition.
- There is no individual who claims to be an incarnation of Santa Muerte, to be her authorized representative, or to receive messages from her around which a solidary religious movement might form. Rather, Santa Muerte devotees, like those of most other folk saints, are loosely organized and lack strong leadership, membership requirements, or permanent sacred space. Despite the spectacular growth in veneration of Santa Muerte, most ritual activity remains personal and private.
- Santa Muerte veneration does not derive from a set of authoritative, formal doctrines to which devotees are committed. The various beliefs about Santa Muerte’s power are generated at the grassroots and are quite simple. They gain credence primarily from devotees’ own testimonials and ritual engagement.

Given that Santa Muerte is an ordinary folk saint by a number of metrics and has an unexceptional history on a number of counts, the recent controversy surrounding the movement could be regarded as puzzling. I argue, however, that current circumstances are not surprising and are the product of rapid movement growth of marginal populations in a situation of social dislocation combined with a challenge to two dominant institutions in Mexico, church and state. In the broadest sense, the challenge presented to both is attempting to maintain legitimacy in their respective institutional domains amid an inability to respond meaningfully to a large and growing segment of the population that is desperate and disempowered.

## 2. Social and Economic Dislocation in Mexican Society

I have argued that a dispossessed/outsider population pool facing dislocation is a key element in the emergence of dangerous religion. There is compelling evidence of social and economic dislocation throughout Mexico, but indigenous populations and the urban underclass face desperate circumstances. While there has been some growth in the middle class, upper class wealth has increased much more rapidly, even during the financial crisis that enveloped much of the West in 2008 and after. Concentration of wealth at the top of the class structure has increased in recent years and is projected to increase further [16]. Currently, the top ten percent of Mexico’s population controls nearly two-thirds of Mexico’s wealth, and the top one percent controls forty percent [17]. While Mexico is the fourteenth

largest economy in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), it is also the second most unequal [18]. Further, the minimum wage in Mexico is the lowest in Latin America [19]. Guillermoprieto summarized the misery that most Mexicans face and the attractiveness of Santa Muerte [20]: “She is only one among several otherworldly figures Mexicans have been turning to as their country has been overwhelmed by every possible difficulty—drought, an outbreak of swine flu followed closely by the collapse of tourism, the depletion of the reserves of oil that are the main export, an economic meltdown, and above all, the wretched gift of the drug trade and its highly publicized and gruesome violence.”

In many respects, the statistics on violence are even bleaker. One dramatic consequence of the government–cartel drug wars, according to a recent study, is that male life expectancy in Mexico actually decreased between 2005 and 2006 [21]. While violence accompanying drug cartel competition and conflict with the government has been ongoing for some time, it became dramatically worse after 2006, when Felipe Calderon was elected President of Mexico and began a high profile campaign to rein in the operation of drug cartels. Estimates are that at least 100,000 Mexicans have lost their lives in the years since.

In the midst of this extreme poverty, severely depressed wages, dramatic structural economic inequality, widespread political corruption, spiraling violence, and surging death rates, there is a massive pool of Mexicans in search of a source of order and control in their personal lives. It is in this environment that Santa Muerte has made her surprising inroads into the historic folk saint veneration niche. With neither political nor religious institutional remedies within reach, personal connections to spiritual power have become attractive. It should be noted that there are other religious affiliations and numerous folk saints readily available to dispossessed Mexicans (New Age groups, Spiritists, Pentecostals, Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses), which only makes Santa Muerte’s ascent even more remarkable.

Santa Muerte offers some distinct advantages to potential followers. While it is true that a broad cross-section of the Mexican population has been attracted to Santa Muerte, her distinctive, core devotees are outsiders: marginal sexual groups (the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender community, sex workers), drug cartels, criminals (drug traffickers, kidnappers, coyotes), incarcerated prisoners, and marginalized young adults. She is believed to offer help her devotees with a variety of commonplace life problems, and devotees purchase various colored votives, depending on the nature of the requests for assistance: white (purity/consecration), red (love/romance), green (justice), yellow (addiction), blue (insight), brown (wisdom), gold (prosperity). Because Santa Muerte is understood to be responsive to the needs of social outsiders, some votives are for requests that could not be made to canonized saints, such as black (vengeance and protection from the vengeance of others). Not only is Santa Muerte open to both righteous and iniquitous requests, she is also regarded as a source of immediate and powerful assistance. As one devotee described her advantages over other folk saints, “I guess I’m still a bit of skeptic for all else other than my most beloved Santa Muerte. She is everything! I feel different now—beyond the absence of approaching pain hanging over me. I feel stronger (not the right word but close enough) and I feel like someone has my back which is the most remarkable feeling” [22]. Another devotee asserted his continued belief in the traditional Catholic saints but also his preference for Santa Muerte; “‘No, I also believe in God, in the Virgin, and all the saints, but I am more devout to [Saint] Death. She is the one that helps me the most,’ says Jose Roberto Jaimes, a man in his 20s who’s come on his knees to thank the skull after surviving three years in jail” [23]. Not only does Santa Muerte address what devotees regard as their most pressing needs, she also assists with their ultimate concern, death, in an environment in which violence and death are all too common: “In the Catholic Church, there’s a lot of saints, and some people believe in them and others don’t. But we know for sure that death exists, and I’m just paying my respect to it and its saint,” Gonzalez said. “I’m only asking it for more time on Earth” [24].

### 3. The Church: Challenges and Responses

The second factor in a movement toward dangerousness is challenges to the institutions of church and state. Santa Muerte veneration raises several challenges to the largest and most powerful religious organization in Mexico, the Roman Catholic Church. The challenges include loss of membership, appropriation of Catholic culture, undermining of church authority, sacralization of deviant lifestyles, and violence against the church's functionaries. The church has responded primarily symbolically, although some of the condemnations are quite harsh, and also has undertaken some limited control initiatives.

Through Mexican history the nation has been overwhelmingly Catholic. However, there has been a steady drain in the number of Mexicans self-identifying as Catholic since the 1950s. While ninety-eight percent of the population was Catholic in 1950, that number dropped steadily in recent decades, reaching eighty-eight percent in 2000. By 2015, the percent reporting as Catholic had dipped to eighty-four percent, and projections are for continued erosion. Some of the decline can be attributed to the church stance on a range of social issues. As one observer commented, "as long as the church continues with its boring liturgies, as long as its representatives remain unconnected to people's needs and keep slamming the use of contraceptives and condoms and saying that sex education is bad, more and more people will leave" [25–27]. However, much of the recent falloff in membership is due to increased competition from other faith traditions. As Chesnut, has observed, "For the past three decades both national bishops' conferences and the Vatican have been denouncing the 'invasion of the sects' in Latin America. Of course, Pentecostals, the most vibrant competitors, have been the primary object of condemnation, but Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, New Age groups and Spiritists have also been inveighed against" [28]. Pope John Paul II went so far as to dub these competitors as "rapacious wolves". While the most serious competition for church members comes principally from Protestant Pentecostals, the explosive growth of Santa Muerte veneration is also troubling to the Vatican. On his recent trip to Mexico, Pope Francis visited the teeming, poverty-stricken, violence-ridden Ecatepec, a sprawling suburb of Mexico City that is also the home of the National Congregation of Santa Muerte. While the Pope did not single out Santa Muerte by name, he did issue a veiled warning to Mexicans "not to succumb to evil: You cannot dialogue with the devil because he will always win" [29]. More pointedly, he stated that he was "particularly concerned about those many persons who, seduced by the empty power of the world, praise illusions and embrace their macabre symbols to commemorate death in exchange for money" [30].

Santa Muerte not only represents one part of the church membership loss problem, she also erodes church authority in several ways. First, Santa Muerte enjoys a reputation among her devotees for more immediate and efficacious responses to petitions than the canonized saints to whom the church encourages personal prayer, leaving the latter in a disadvantaged position. Why should faithful Catholics pray to canonized saints if Santa Muerte is actually more responsive and effective? As Enriqueta Romero (Doña Queta), who created the first public display of Santa Muerte in Tepitito, asserted, "God is our first love and our only saviour, and then comes Santa Muerte who can help us reach God—but not the Church" [31]. Further, all of the claims to Santa Muerte's responsiveness come from grassroots devotees, thus shifting control over one's personal relationship with God away from the institutional church and toward individual petitioners. Jose Roberto Jaimes, who had spent three years in prison stated that "...I also believe in God, in the Virgin, and all the saints, but I am more devout to [Saint] Death. She is the one that helps me the most..." [23].

Second, the explosive growth of Santa Muerte veneration offers difficult to refute evidence of the church's inability to reach and hold the loyalty of large and important rural and underclass urban populations that traditionally have identified as Catholic. This is particularly significant in light of the decline of the 1950s–1960s Liberation Theology movement within the church that was based on moral rejection of poverty and injustice in Latin America. As anthropologist Laura Rouch commented, "As liberation theology waned in the last decade of the 20th century, ... people who may

have previously found support from a socially radical priest had nowhere to turn. When they lost a family member, became ill or got sent to jail, many turned to Santa Muerte" [32].

Third, the penchant for Santa Muerte devotees to claim simultaneous standing as "good Catholics" challenges the Roman Catholic Church's claim to possess the authority of the "one true church". Not only do Santa Muerte devotees claim dual loyalties, the devotees are egalitarian, representing a broader cross-section of the Mexican population than the Catholic Church is able to attract. Further, the frequent presence of innovations on Catholic iconography (by transposing Santa Muerte imagery onto images of the Virgin of Guadalupe, for example) and on Catholic rituals (prayer, the rosary, and the mass) in Santa Muerte veneration, represent an unwelcome appropriation of Catholic culture in the service of what the Catholic hierarchy regards as a rogue saint [33]. Just as problematic, is the infiltration of unsavory requests made to canonized saints, most notably St. Jude [34].

Finally, Santa Muerte veneration blurs moral boundaries that the church seeks to defend. Santa Muerte is understood to be non-judgmental and open to requests for assistance on a variety of matters that would be regarded as inappropriate requests if made to canonized saints, such as protection against arrest, revenge against enemies, and romantic relationship problems. As one devotee described her approachability, "La Flaquita is an outsider just like us", she says, "That's why we love her, because she doesn't judge us for what we do." Argelia says Santa Muerte helped her in past times of trouble. "Like when I got pregnant and thought my father would beat me to death, but he hugged me instead" [31]. The moral problem is not only that Santa Muerte is responsive to questionable requests, it is also the appeal mechanism. Devotees bargain with Santa Muerte, giving gifts (candies, bread, water, money, tobacco, alcohol, drugs, flowers) in return for assured assistance with their requests. This combination smacks of magic and bribery, which clash with formal church doctrine.

A different kind of threat to the Catholic Church is the compromising of priests. This occurs in two ways. One is violence against priests by drug traffickers and other criminal groups. Just in the last three years, eleven priests are known to have been murdered. However, it appears that these murders have been occurring for much longer and that the actual number is much higher because there are numerous cases where priests have simply disappeared and their bodies never recovered. Many of the murders have been particularly brutal and have occurred after repeated warnings to priests not to protect vulnerable populations impacted by violence or to speak out against drug-related violence [34,35]. Some priests have been quietly moved from particularly dangerous areas. The inability of the church to protect its priests in local villages is a direct challenge to its authority and also limits its outreach potential in areas plagued by ongoing violence. The other source of compromise, which is vigorously denied by the church, is a willingness by some priests to accept donations from drug dealers in an effort to financially support sometimes struggling local churches [36–39]. As one journalist observed, "...in the rugged, dirt-poor hills of Sinaloa state, the traditional home of Mexico's drug lords, it is obvious that 'narco-charity' has been an important weapon in winning hearts and minds, if not souls" [38]. In some cases the church's moral position has been eroded by local priests accepting donations or building chapels by asserting that it is not the responsibility of the church to monitor the sources of donations [37].

In response to the various challenges posed by Santa Muerte, the Catholic Church has voiced forceful opposition to veneration but has undertaken little direct action. Various church leaders have condemned veneration [28]. The Mexican Bishops Conference issued a lengthy statement, in which it rejected an economic basis for Santa Muerte veneration, instead referring to it as a "crisis of faith", the "grave sin" of "idolatry", a possible source of "demonic possession", and not a Catholic devotion [40]. As Chesnut summarizes the campaign against Santa Muerte [34]: denunciations have increased in frequency and intensity since the president of the Pontifical Council of Culture, Cardinal Giancarlo Ravassi condemned [Santa Muerte] on three separate occasions on Mexican soil during a four day visit there last May. Last October, the archbishop of Oaxaca even threatened excommunication of Catholics who venerate the skeleton saint.

At the same time, despite the murder of priests who support indigenous and underclass populations, the church apparently has not pressured the government to solve these murders and has been criticized for this [34,35,41]: “The church has been very lukewarm—it doesn’t want to confront the government about this. They’re in their comfort zone, very installed in the networks of power—the leadership of the church—and they don’t want to open new fronts....” Similarly, the church has vigorously condemned local parishes accepting donations from drug cartels, but has no mechanism in place for tracking donors and donations that would permit enforcement. In one instance, where a reputed drug lord, Heriberto Lazcano Lazcano, donated funds to build a chapel in Tezontle, with a plaque reading “Donated by Heriberto Lazcano Lazcano, Lord, hear my prayer,” the church did order the elderly priest into semi-retirement [17].

One form of direct action that some priests have taken is “spiritual warfare” in the form of exorcism of cartel members [23]. A priest in Mexico City articulated the logic of this practice [42]: “We believe that behind all these big and structural evils, there is a dark agent and his name is The Demon. That is why the Lord wants to have here a ministry of exorcism and liberation, for the fight against the devil.” A priest who performed such exorcisms on cartel “hitmen” echoed that theme, recounting the heinous murders one individual had committed and attributed those murders to the hitman having “committed his life to the service of Saint Death”. The priest linked the hitman’s actions to Satanism, stating that “The cult is the first step into Satanism and then into this band of people [the drug traffickers], that’s why he was chosen for that job.”

#### 4. The State: Challenges and Responses

The second institution facing challenges from rapidly expanding Santa Muerte veneration is the state. Santa Muerte has presented two broad challenges to the state, compromising of state authority and religious organization of opposition.

The Mexican government faces numerous challenges to its authority, which ultimately rests on some combination of legitimacy and effectiveness. Both are under duress. There is the simmering discontent among indigenous populations and the urban underclass, which are facing inequality, poverty, violence and, more significantly, governmental inability or unwillingness to address those issues meaningfully. Beyond these seeming intractable structural problems, there are direct challenges to governmental authority. For example, there is the longstanding, even if presently less intense, conflict with the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional), which is centered largely in Chiapas, where the Zapatistas continue to pursue territorial sovereignty and independent social institutions [43]. There are political and police officials who are in collusion with the drug cartels, which undermines popular confidence in the government officials to whom citizens must turn for assistance. For example, one of the most shocking cases occurred in 2014, when 43 college students were abducted and presumably killed by police colluding with a local drug gang [35]. Since that time, over 100 more individuals have gone missing [44]. Furthermore, police and government officials are known to venerate Santa Muerte even while the government formally condemns the movement, creating the same kind of mixed loyalties that plague the Catholic Church.

The more significant threat to governmental authority comes from the drug cartels. Some of their leaders have already achieved outlaw hero status. For example, despite his undisputed reputation as the leader of the violent Sinaloa drug cartel, El Chapo (Joaquín Guzmán Loera) has attained hero status in some circles for his ability (until recently) to outfox police and military units that have attempted to capture and contain him for many years [45]. Indeed, “for many Mexicans, he is an unusual combination of Robin Hood and billionaire, a source of mirth, grudging respect and even outright reverence because of his repeated ability to outfox the country’s deeply unpopular government....He fought the law, and he won. He beat what many Mexicans see as a corrupt and feckless governing class” [41].

The outlaw hero, Jesús Malverde, offers a legitimating model for criminal activity [46]. He was a blue-collar worker during an historical crisis period that, in many respects, resembles the times of

his contemporary devotees. After his parents died from a treatable illness or hunger, he responded to this injustice by turning to banditry. However, his legend is one of “the generous bandit” (el bandido generoso) who stole from the rich and gave to the poor. Ultimately, he was caught and executed by the government authorities. This generous bandit image provides symbolic cover for drug cartels. As Chesnut observes, although veneration of Malverde is also commonplace among law abiding, lower social stratum Mexicans, “Association with Malverde allowed certain drug cartels to appropriate his Robin Hood-like characteristics to their criminal enterprise. Investment in community infrastructure on the part of the drug gangs coupled with the government’s reputation as corrupt and absent contributed to this populist image. It is advantageous for narcos to appear as though they are simple, faith-filled folk” [46]. There is evidence that the generous bandit image has been at least partly successful. Some ordinary Mexicans are convinced that their best prospects for safety and survival are with protection from the drug cartels: “The drug dealers do more for the people than the government does,” said Eric Reyes, 33, a systems engineer from Mexico City, who stopped by the shrine out of curiosity while on vacation. “If you live in a dealer’s territory he treats you well. The government won’t do anything for you. It’s all bureaucracy and red tape” [41].

A greater potential challenge to governmental authority is the sanctification of Nazario Moreno González, onetime leader of The Michoacán Family (La Familia Michoacána) and his campaign to legitimate the cartel religiously. Moreno himself was dubbed San Naza Moreno (and also “The Craziest One” [El Más Loco]), even while he was still alive. More significantly, he led an effort to gain religious legitimation for his cartel. Moreno created a collection of his own thoughts and philosophy that he referred to as a “bible” and referred to murders carried out by La Familia as “divine justice”. He drew inspiration from the work of Christian author John Eldredge. In search of legitimation, La Familia also touted its program to rehabilitate drug users and prohibited its members from using drugs. The cartel provided financial support to local organizations and began to assume some community and state functions (constructing roads and bridges, erecting chapels, establishing medical clinics, levying taxes, controlling crime) [41]. The Knights Templar (who drew on the legendary tradition of the Christian military order, Poor Fellow-Soldiers of Christ and of the Temple of Solomon), a schismatic offshoot of La Familia, continued the La Familia tradition of sacralization of its activities [47]. The threat, of course, is that one or more cartels might successfully link the criminal activities to a religious mission. A religiously self-legitimated cartel would possess the symbolic resources to increase internal solidarity, justify criminal conduct, and recruit a broader support base, as a number of political and military movements have.

There have been some governmental control initiatives directed at Santa Muerte veneration, but, symbolic condemnations aside, these individual initiatives do not rise to the level of a coordinated control campaign. Government action began in 2001 when, in the course of the simultaneous government campaign against drug cartels and the rise of Santa Muerte, the military reported finding Santa Muerte shrines on the raided premises of cartel leaders with increasing frequency [48]. President Felipe Calderon began a more broad-based effort to not just exterminate the drug cartels but to suppress music, videos, images, and clothing that celebrated what was referred to as “narco-culture” [49]. Santa Muerte became a “narco-cult” that was deemed part of “narco-culture” [50]. In 2003, David Romo Guillén founded the Traditionalist Mexican-American Catholic Church, which was registered with the Mexican government. However; the Church’s registration was revoked two years later, and, in 2011, Romo was convicted and sentenced to a long prison term for kidnapping, drug trafficking, and money laundering. While the church was denied status as an officially recognized religion, it remained free to operate without such recognition, and there is little evidence that the government action diminished the appeal of Santa Muerte. In 2009, then Mexican President Felipe Calderon pronounced Santa Muerte “religious enemy number one” and ordered several dozen Santa Muerte shrines along the border between the U.S. and Mexico bulldozed [42].

## 5. The Social Control Response: Church and State

Church and state, the two most powerful social institutions in Mexico, have both been engaged in rhetorical opposition to Santa Muerte for some time; they share a mutual opposition to veneration of this folk saint for sometimes different and sometimes overlapping reasons. Each has experienced declining legitimacy among ordinary Mexicans; violence against its institutional functionaries; a challenge to its perceived domain of moral authority; and competing loyalties by its functionaries in the face of formal, public opposition to Santa Muerte. Yet, the two institutions have largely proceeded independently.

There has been overlapping condemnation of Santa Muerte. As already noted, the church has emphasized Santa Muerte veneration as not Catholic and as “sinister” and “infernal”; veneration has been symbolically linked to Satanism, and as a path to demonic possession. Various governmental control agencies, both in Mexico and the U.S., have linked horrific or bizarre crimes to Santa Muerte. For example, Bunker and Sullivan write that “Human body parts and bowls of blood left at *Santa Muerte* altars, both public and private, are becoming more common as are actual human sacrifices and the ritualized dismemberment of the dead” ([51], p. 5). Additionally, discovering Santa Muerte imagery during raids on drug cartel sites has been interpreted as establishing Santa Muerte veneration as a source of criminal activity rather than as a defense against the dangers of engaging in criminal activity.

One important reason for this absence of coordination, is the long history of tension between church and state and competition for Mexican citizens’ loyalty. These tensions trace at least to the mid-nineteenth century, when then president Benito Juárez confiscated church property, scuttled independent church courts, and even prohibited clerical dress outside the church. While some of the restrictions were not systematically enforced, even stronger legal controls (Calles Laws) were enacted after the 1910 Mexican Revolution. For example, the Mexican Constitution, adopted in 1917, nationalized church property, prohibited church run primary and secondary schools, and outlawed clerical political pronouncements. The 1920s witnessed a grassroots uprising against anti-clerical laws, the Cristero Rebellion. Although peace was ultimately negotiated, repression of the church continued. Indeed, it was not until 1992 that formal diplomatic relations between the Mexican government and the Vatican were restored. Over time, more cooperative relations have developed, with each side limiting its criticism of the other. This delicate balance of historical mutual antagonism and current mutual accommodation has impacted the response to drug cartel violence. As Agren [50] summed up the church’s response to state actions, “As drug war violence has escalated over the past decades, church officials have mostly avoided all but the most timid pronouncements on the bloodletting and corruption—something observers attribute to the Catholic hierarchy’s gradual rapprochement with the political class.” The state, of course, has accommodated to the overwhelmingly Catholic allegiance of ordinary Mexicans and of the Virgin of Guadalupe as a national symbol. These historically tense but symbiotic relationships have limited the potential for a coordinated church–state campaign in response to Santa Muerte popularity and growth.

## 6. Whither Santa Muerte

As I argued in the introduction to this article, ultimately the niche that an emerging religious movement comes to occupy is a product of three factors: the availability (size and composition) of a pool of potential supporters, the symbolic and social organization of the movement, and the symbolic and social organization of institutional control agencies. In a larger sense, the argument is that in order to understand both the trajectory of developing movements and the societal niche they come to occupy, analysis should focus on the structure and interaction of these three elements. Santa Muerte is an interesting case to examine, because its position in the Mexican social order is currently being determined and all three of the major factors shaping religious movement developments and accompanying dangerousness designations are in play. The objective here has not been to predict an outcome, but rather to analyze the operation of the three pivotal factors, which, in turn, leads to identifying potential developmental scenarios that would lead to different levels of dangerousness

designation. Four scenarios present varying degrees of plausibility at this juncture: movement suppression, movement settling, cohesive movement development, and narco-religion formation.

One possible scenario is movement suppression. Santa Muerte is, after all, formally opposed by the two most powerful institutions in Mexico, church and state. They both have independent and overlapping interests in, at least, containing Santa Muerte. Yet, each has employed more symbolic than substantive control mechanisms, and there is little evidence to date of a coordinated response. Despite their enormous power, both lack effective control mechanisms to contain an enormously popular grass-roots religious movement, and they also face the risk alienating tens of millions of Mexican devotees. One emerging tactic has been to attempt to partition Santa Muerte devotees into dangerous and non-dangerous categories to increase acceptance of social control initiatives. For example, Bunker and Sullivan make reference to “dark” Santa Muerte veneration ([49], p. 5): “What is known is that the darker variant of *Santa Muerte* is by no means benign and that simple commodities are unacceptable as offerings. Dark altars laden with weapons, money, narcotics, and sometimes stained with blood have been identified.” To the extent that this tactic is successful, legitimate Santa Muerte veneration would be detached from drug cartel veneration and pose less of a threat. There certainly is resistance among many Santa Muerte devotees to being identified with drug trafficking and violence.

While the public emergence and growth of Santa Muerte has been extraordinary, it is possible that, in response to changing social conditions, participant growth and passion will plateau. That is, Santa Muerte could become simply another in the pantheon of Mexican folk saints. It is conceivable, if presently unlikely, that the Mexican government will curtail the debilitating social inequality, rampant political corruption, and the power of drug cartels to a point that simmering unrest among indigenous and urban underclass populations will lessen. Perhaps the more plausible alternative is that Santa Muerte veneration will remain largely loosely organized and personal and the movement will lose participants to other folk saints. St. Jude and Jesús Malverde have already begun to show signs of rapid growth in the same folk saint niche [46]. To the extent that folk saint veneration is faddish, such competition could easily expand. In this scenario, Santa Muerte would become more tolerable to both church and state.

A third scenario is the development of a more highly organized Santa Muerte movement. To date, Santa Muerte veneration has been largely personal. Most temples are small and personal, there is little in the way of formal organization and leadership, and devotee petitions are for personal assistance. It is possible that, as opposed to a mitigation of the sources of popular unrest envisioned in the second scenario, conditions could become more dire and conflicted. There is at least the potential for a coalescing and radicalization of the Santa Muerte devotee base. Laycock suggested this possibility [51]:

The destruction of shrines in Nuevo Laredo and Tijuana, as well as the condemnation from the Catholic Church, has begun to galvanize devotion to Santa Muerte into a formal religious institution. David Romo Guillen has emerged as the de facto leader of the movement. He has taken the title of archbishop, calling his church “The Mexican-US Catholic Apostolic Traditional Church.” In 2005, Guillen requested the Interior Secretariat to grant his church status as a legally recognized religion. When his request was denied, Guillen organized protests.

The conviction and imprisonment of Romo appears to have ended that particular development, but not that line of action. As Laycock commented [51], “Devotion to Santa Muerte, also known as *La Flaca* (the skinny one) and *La Nina Blanca* (the white girl), began as a popular movement within Mexican Catholicism and is now developing into an autonomous religious institution.” The cohesiveness of the Santa Muerte movement would be increased by a control agency campaign that grouped all devotees together. For example, since Santa Muerte’s popularity began accelerating, one governmental initiative has been to expand its targets. Laycock concludes that [51], “President Calderon has adopted a ‘holistic approach’, attacking not only the cartels, but ‘narco-culture’. Proposed reforms will ban the broadcast of drug ballads, known as *narcocorridos*, as well as videos and images that glorify drug traffickers. The

government also appears to have targeted the worship of Santa Muerte, interpreting the movement as a ‘narco-cult’.

Finally, there is the possibility that a smaller but more cohesive movement will emerge through cooptation of at least some form of Santa Muerte veneration by one or more drug cartels. There is already some evidence of this in La Familia Michoacana and Los Caballeros Templarios. This outcome would be particularly likely to the extent that a drug cartel is successful in expanding partially developed strategies: control over territory, “protection” of populations within that territory, a viable financial base, assumption of state functions, and provision of community services. If religious organization is added to the geographic, social, and political organization mix, a more potent combination of symbolic legitimation and social organization could emerge. While none of the necessary elements is currently in place and the challenges of successfully implementing this strategy are daunting, control agencies do sense this threat. As Bunker and Sullivan [49] observe, “...enough ritualistic behaviors, including killings, have occurred in Mexico to leave open the possibility that a spiritual insurgency component of the narcotics wars now exists.”

The analysis presented here is most instructive when placed in a larger organization development framework [1]. From this perspective, the Santa Muerte movement is not idiosyncratic, even if the ultimate developmental outcome is not clear at this moment. Indeed, the four scenarios presented here are premised on basic organizational factors that influence the developmental trajectories of many kinds of organizations, whether development is measured in terms of simple survival or achievement of more significant niches in an organizational economy. The historical record on developmental outcomes for various types of organizations is, in fact, quite clear. A high percentage of organizations simply disappear within a relatively short time. Of those that survive, most carve out a modest niche in the organizational landscape. New religious movements, like Santa Muerte, are no exception. What I have examined here are three basic factors that significantly influence movement development. The significance of analyzing Santa Muerte resides in what the analysis adds to understanding movement structure and dynamics more generally. Consider the three factors that I have identified.

With respect to support base, most new movements emerge in response to some type of social dislocation and attract a narrow segment of the population. Most do not immediately recognize their dependence on that support base, and many movements, therefore, languish or fail when the initial support base declines or disintegrates and movements are unable to identify an alternative. New movements also often find themselves in competition for the same support base and must remain distinctive and attractive to maintain a viable niche. Santa Muerte faces both of these issues. For movements that do persist, the challenge is to develop a viable organizational structure, which may involve a variety of types of leadership, degrees of cohesiveness, and symbolic identities. Santa Muerte’s loosely organized participants, weak leadership, and relatively undeveloped mythic and ritual structure is one type of organization, but that organizational type does not readily engender high commitment and long-term stability. Finally, new movements almost always enter an already established organizational field in which institutional actors assert authority over different arenas of social activity. By their very nature, new movements challenge established institutional interest groups in some fashion. Movements face the issue of how to position relative to those institutional interests, and institutional actors face the issue of whether and how to respond to movement challenges. In the Santa Muerte case, the movement is positioning with respect to both church and state, and both institutions are maneuvering so as to contain the challenges the movement presents. While outcomes on all three of these factors remain contingent, our understanding of how new movements survive and develop is enhanced by incorporating these outcomes into the larger movement theory framework.

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