

The project is dedicated to the Mexican folk saint, Santa Muerte (Spanish for Saint Death). At its roots, this phenomenon was inspired by medieval motifs such as *danse macabre* (the dance of death) and *memento mori* (remember, you must die), which were introduced to the regions of present-day Mexico by Spanish evangelizers. The popularity of this phenomenon has significantly increased over the past 25 years, with the number of followers of this patron saint estimated to be in the tens of millions within Mexico alone. Despite the large number of devotees, the cult of Santa Muerte is highly controversial. Media reports, particularly in the tabloid press, often link it to organized crime, especially drug trafficking, while the Catholic Church has officially condemned it, labeling it as heretical. A similar portrayal is found in TV series and films, where Saint Death is depicted as the protector of the socially marginalized. On the other hand, this phenomenon can also be associated with the lively celebrations of the Mexican Day of the Dead, the colorful skull decorations called *calaveras*, and the decorative garlands made of flowers and paper cutouts. These contrasts make Santa Muerte an extremely interesting subject of study. Moreover, the cult lacks specific tenets or dogmas, giving followers significant freedom in how they venerate the patroness. This leads to constant changes in both the image of the saint and the rituals dedicated to her, as Saint Death demonstrates a hybrid potential and an extraordinary ability to absorb elements and symbols from other religious (such as Afro-Caribbean, neopagan, or Far Eastern cults) and cultural phenomena (inspirations from video games, metal music, and horror films).

The project aims to present a new perspective in the study of the cult of Saint Death by applying methodologies from theater and performance studies. Among the various forms of venerating this figure, special attention should be given to the pilgrimages dedicated to the patron, such as the annual pilgrimage in Mérida. This event is one of the oldest and largest of its kind, having garnered many followers throughout Mexico, and it exhibits numerous unique characteristics. The conscious theatricalization of this ritual, its spectacular nature, openness to interaction, desire to provide entertainment, and specific message give the religious event an artistic dimension that is inseparably linked to its sacred aspect. A micro-comparative approach to the topic will allow for the analysis of private rituals, demonstrating the internal diversity of this phenomenon as well as the significance of the individual actions of specific devotees in the ongoing processes of hybridization.

The project also aims to demonstrate that an equally significant factor in the extraordinary popularity of the cult, alongside the socio-economic situation of its followers, is its performative and inclusive nature, which allows for improvisation and thus adapts to contemporary needs. So far, this issue has been analyzed from anthropological, sociological, and historical perspectives. The innovation of this project lies in pioneering research on the cult of Santa Muerte from the perspective of theater and performance studies, as well as comparative studies of culture and religions, with a special focus on micro-comparative methods. This approach enables capturing the individual perspectives of specific devotees.

The project will demonstrate the remarkable usefulness of tools from theater and performance studies for religious studies and anthropology, as they allow for more effective analysis of contemporary, hybrid religious phenomena such as the cult of Saint Death. Due to the intensity of globalization, the influence of popular culture, and the impact of new media, the performative aspect of the cult has gained significant importance. This is particularly evident in the self-expression of devotees, the increasing individualization of practices within various non-orthodox movements, and the aesthetic dimension of these phenomena. The cult of Saint Death encompasses all these elements and serves as an excellent example to showcase the applicability of theories from performance studies, given its high syncretic potential.

The aesthetic sphere and artistic dimension of the cult, especially its theatricalized rituals, have not yet received comprehensive treatment, which constitutes a significant gap in research. The application of a completely new research perspective through the utilization of methodologies from the field of performance studies to analyze the cult of Saint Death will allow for the presentation of this intensively explored research topic in an original and unprecedented manner in previous publications. This makes the potential of a project dedicated to these issues high, and its results - both due to the subject of research and the applied methodology - can generate significant interest among representatives of various fields: religious studies, arts studies, and Latin American studies.