

Cambridge Elements

Elements in New Religious Movements

Series Editor

Rebecca Moore

San Diego State University

Founding Editor

†James R. Lewis

Wuhan University

SANTA MUERTE DEVOTION

Vulnerability, Protection, Intimacy

Wil G. Pansters

Utrecht University



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-009-61970-7 — Santa Muerte Devotion
Wil G. Pansters
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)



Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi – 110025, India
103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment,
a department of the University of Cambridge.

We share the University's mission to contribute to society through the pursuit of
education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781009619707

DOI: 10.1017/9781009446631

© Wil G. Pansters 2025

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions
of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take
place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press & Assessment.

When citing this work, please include a reference to the DOI 10.1017/9781009446631

First published 2025

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-009-61970-7 Hardback
ISBN 978-1-009-44661-7 Paperback
ISSN 2635-232X (online)
ISSN 2635-2311 (print)

Cambridge University Press & Assessment has no responsibility for the persistence
or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this
publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will
remain, accurate or appropriate.

Santa Muerte Devotion

Vulnerability, Protection, Intimacy

Elements in New Religious Movements

DOI: 10.1017/9781009446631
First published online: February 2025

Wil G. Pansters
Utrecht University

Author for correspondence: Wil G. Pansters, w.g.pansters@uu.nl

Abstract: In recent decades, the cult of Santa Muerte has become a remarkable phenomenon in Mexico's popular religious landscape, from where it has migrated abroad. Due to the uncommon iconography of the robed skeleton and the association with criminality, the Santa Muerte cult has been the object of public controversy. This Element deconstructs mainstream views of Santa Muerte devotion by privileging the voices and practices of devotees. Counterintuitively, Santa Muerte devotion is about assuring a good life in health, work, love, justice, and security. Notwithstanding the cult's rapid growth and public visibility since 2000, it is deeply embedded in Mexico's religious and cultural history. The analysis of material culture, theology, and ritual demonstrates the importance of devotional intimacy. This Element also studies how gender, family, leadership, and political relations intersect with the cult. Santa Muerte popular religiosity is examined in terms of socio-economic vulnerabilities, ineffective social protections, exclusion, and existential insecurities.

Keywords: Santa Muerte, popular religion, ritual, vulnerability, Catholicism

© Wil G. Pansters 2025

ISBNs: 9781009619707 (HB), 9781009446617 (PB), 9781009446631 (OC)
ISSNs: 2635-232X (online), 2635-2311 (print)

Contents

Introduction	1
1 Origins and Background of Santa Muerte Devotion	9
2 Material Culture and Spaces of Santa Muerte Devotion	21
3 Ritual and Theology of Santa Muerte Devotion	35
4 The Organization and Politics of Santa Muerte Devotion	49
5 Santa Muerte Devotion and Society: Vulnerability, Insecurity, and the Roman Catholic Church	58
Epilogue	68
References	72