

Antecedents and Remnants of Apocalyptic Christianity

An Iconology of Death

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ABSTRACT

La Santa Muerte is a folk saint depicted as a female Grim Reaper in Mexico and the Southwestern United States. The Grim Reaper, as an iconic representation of death, was derived from the Angel of Death found in pseudepigrapha and apocalyptic writings of Jewish and early Christian writers. The Angel of Death arose from images and practices in pre-Christian Europe and throughout the Mediterranean region. Images taken from *Revelation* were used to console the survivors of the Black Death in Western Europe and produced a material culture that taught the Christian notion of dying well. The combination of the scythe (used in the eschatological harvest), the black cowl (worn by medieval priests and monks officiating at funerals), and the skeleton (as the physical body of the deceased) are a series of apocalyptic Christian referents that form a metonymical composite referred to as the Grim Reaper.

In medieval Iberian Dances of Death, the Grim Reaper was depicted as female, an unyielding social leveler, and an important participant in the Last Judgment. Personalized Death became associated with healing, renewal, magic, and binding, as apocalyptic Christianity blended with the Christian cult of the saints and the Virgin Mary during the Reconquista and the colonization of Mesoamerica. Utilizing secondary historical sources, metonymy, and iconology this Master of Arts thesis posits that the La Santa Muerte image resulted from a long historical interaction of Greek, Roman, Jewish, Visigothic, Islamic, and Christian death imagery leading up to the colonization of Mesoamerica.

For Barry Pohl

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1 INTRODUCTION

La Santa Muerte (Saint Death)—sometimes referred to as *La Santísima Muerte* (Most Holy Death)—is a folk saint in Mexico and the United States. *La Santa Muerte* is an icon representing the skeletal embodiment of death depicted as a female Grim Reaper (Chesnut 2012:27). Analyzing the social historical trajectory of the Grim Reaper is important in order to understand why adherents of *La Santa Muerte* associate themselves with a female icon of death. Beginning with a historical rendering of the Grim Reaper, the *La Santa Muerte* icon is the result of complex social processes involving conflictive and harmonious interactions over long periods of change within medieval European Christianity and the colonization of New Spain (Chesnut 2012:27-33, Graziano 2007:78, Gruzinski 2001 [1990]:164, 1990:219). The likeness of *La Santa Muerte* to the Grim Reaper is a signification of death as an embodied figure (Cánovas 2011:562, Chesnut 2012:53). *La Santa Muerte*, then, is an icon representing a female Grim Reaper that currently functions as a folk saint in Mexico and the Southwestern United States and deconstructing it illustrates a number of characteristics that over time culminated in its present configuration (Chesnut 2012:36).

Graziano (2007:vii) defines a folk saint as a deceased person or invented personage that is unrecognized by official Roman Catholic Church authority, yet maintains a significant cultic following due to its miraculous abilities. Between the 3rd and 6th centuries, sainthood encompassed male and female martyrs, Church Fathers, and Christ's Apostles (Abou-El Haj 1994:27-28, Brown 1981:8). The deceased martyr, Apostle, or Church Father was considered a saint because their earthly remains appeared to have miraculous effects on the living (Schopen 1998:262). In the 11th century, the

miraculous effects of the living, like that of Francis of Assisi, became grounds for posthumously canonizing individuals as saints (Head 1990:4). Vatican authorities determine which individual is worthy of being canonized as a saint; whereas folk saints are a phenomenon that develop from a cultic following of deceased or created personages understood to be miraculous (Graziano 2007:viii-ix).

The term cult is understood sociologically in this religious context, in the manner Durkheim (2001 [1912]:40) proposed, in which religions are made up of a series of smaller cults that may or may not be allied, autonomous, or hierarchically ranked, but are associated with the larger religion in some systemic fashion. Durkheim's (ibid:46) use of the term cult is derived from his definition of religion as a systematic set of proscribed beliefs and practices relationally pertaining to particular things that unite people into an ethically bound community. Adherents of La Santa Muerte typically maintain a degree of autonomy while existing in proximity to other unofficial Catholic practices and icons (Chesnut 2012:59). According to Chesnut (ibid), Roman Catholics in Mexican communities whose lifestyles are considered unacceptable by orthodox beliefs are drawn to the cult of La Santa Muerte.

Chesnut (2012:6) and Graziano (2007:ix) both emphasize that the folk status of autonomous cults devoted to non-canonical saints—specifically La Santa Muerte—contributes to a common group identity without a unified doctrine of belief. Using the term folk in reference to a particular peoples' cultural identity, I attend to Dundes' (1965:2) definition of folk as a collective identity among a group of individuals derived from a specific connection of tradition or shared custom; even if the individuals within the group do not know one another, their common element of tradition gives them a sense

of partaking in a publicly shared identity. The origin of La Santa Muerte cannot be uncovered solely with an analysis of doctrinal literature, but is revealed also through a reconstruction of the cultic folk saint's iconicity. Icon is understood in this context as a semiotic term described by Peirce (1998 [1895]:13) as a sign that so closely resembles what it signifies, the relationship between signifier and signified cannot be misunderstood. La Santa Muerte is a signification of Death as an embodied skeletal actor, sharing the likeness of a female Grim Reaper, and functioning as the common factor that links certain individuals together in a group identity.

The Grim Reaper developed from the blending of the metonyms scythe, cowl, and skeleton that together form a single abstract composite (Turner 1996:77). In analyzing the Grim Reaper, metonymy refers to a cognitive blending of two distinct conceptual elements, in which the first element leads one to think of the second element by way of an overarching theme or composite of the cognitive blending (Radden and Kövecses 1999:21). The Grim Reaper, for example, is a composite whose scythe is a metonym for the eschatological harvest in *Revelation*. The iconology of Death is a historical reconstruction of metonymical blending, and of intertwining death imagery that resulted in the Grim Reaper and thereafter took the form of La Santa Muerte. My use of iconology herein follows Astor-Aguilera (2010:19) as a historical study of iconic imagery, including an icon's origin, continuity, alteration, and entanglement with other images.

La Santa Muerte's likeness to the Grim Reaper—to be demonstrated in what follows—is rendered from pre-Christian European, Mediterranean, and apocalyptic Christian iconic representations of death. The iconology of La Santa Muerte remains underemphasized within scholarship, yet the manner in which La Santa Muerte is

represented remains central to how adherents relate to the icon (Chesnut 2012:191-193). What is now known as La Santa Muerte is a combination of pre-Christian Greek and Roman death imagery in conjunction with Judaic and Christian images of the Angel of Death that amalgamated during the era of the Black Death in Western Europe as the Grim Reaper and was then associated with the cults of the saints and the Virgin Mary (Chesnut 2012:27, 52, Graziano 2007:78, Reyes Ruiz 2011:52-53).

La Santa Muerte is a complex figure that has begun to attract increased scholarly attention. For example, Gruzinski (1990:219-220) reveals that in New Spain as early as 1797, devotions to Death were referred to as practices related to “*la santa muerte*.” Toor (1947:141-145) notes that La Santa Muerte was ritually invoked privately in Mexico as a form of esoteric love magic in the early twentieth century. Kelly (1965:108) states that the icon was one of three love charms associated with healing practices in Northern Mexico. Thompson (1998:405) demonstrates that La Santa Muerte has been privately utilized along the Mexico-United States border since at least 1997. Graziano (2007:78) argues that La Santa Muerte—and her male Argentinian counterpart *San La Muerte*—emanate from a medieval European culture that features the Grim Reaper, the Dance of Death, Catholic Holy Week rituals, Penitent death imagery, and medieval notions of witchcraft.

Howe et al. (2009:34) indicate the manner in which Mexican transgendered sex workers use private locations of veneration of La Santa Muerte to establish social networks on both sides of the Mexico and United States border. Chesnut (2012:8) cites that the popularity of the cult has grown since Doña Enriqueta Romero built the first outdoor shrine dedicated to La Santa Muerte in 2001 in Tepito (a barrio in Mexico City).

Chesnut (2012:189) also invalidates claims from adherents that La Santa Muerte is related to *Mictecacihautl*, the so-called Aztec goddess of the underworld, favoring a medieval Catholic association with *La Parca*, an image claimed to have been brought to the Americas by Spanish missionaries. Furthermore, Martín (2013:31) argues that La Santa Muerte allows adherents to gain a sense of agency amidst institutionalized marginalization.

Per the above, an iconology of Death is necessary in understanding the icon of La Santa Muerte as a folk saint. I hypothesize that the La Santa Muerte icon has resulted from a long historical interaction of Greek, Roman, Judaic, Visigothic, Islamic, and European Christian death imagery leading up to the colonization of Mesoamerica. What follows is an iconology of Death that examines the intertwining historical trajectories of Grim Reaper imagery, European Christian death imagery, the cult of the Virgin Mary, and Christian relics in the cult of the saints.

2 THE ICONOLOGY OF THE GRIM REAPER

Chesnut (2012:6) notes that La Santa Muerte is regularly represented as a female Grim Reaper and thus a historical genealogy of La Santa Muerte must take into account an iconology of personalized Death. The Grim Reaper evolved from dancing and singing skeletons depicted in the Dance of Death poetry during the bubonic plague, or the era of the Black Death (Eire 1995:10, 309, Jones 2010:81). During the Black Death, 1340-1360, Europeans employed imagery from *Revelation* because the plague was believed to be a sign of the Apocalypse (Pagels 2012:37). In this chapter, I examine and historically contextualize the metonyms that make up the Grim Reaper: the skeleton, the cowl, and the scythe (Turner 1996:76).

Metonymical Analysis

The scythe, the skeleton, and the cowl compose a material representation of an abstract concept that Cánovas (2011:562) refers to as a causal tautology (Death causes death). In this tautology, the scythe is transformed from a harvesting tool to an eschatological instrument while being combined with the skeleton of a deceased human and the cowl worn by Christian monks (Turner 1996:80). The scythe, the skeleton, and the cowl within this tautology make abstract death personified, or possibly personalized (ibid:78). The blending of abstraction and personification depicts the Grim Reaper as bringing souls to justice in the Last Judgment without personal attachment and discrimination (Jones 2010:80, Turner 1996:78). Each metonym within the composite of the Grim Reaper carries with it a certain historical significance connected to apocalyptic beliefs associated with the Black Death.

The significance of the Grim Reaper's cowl is metonymically derived from an association with the clothing of priests attending to funerals and the rites of the dying during the era of the Black Death (Fauconnier and Turner 1999:84). The connection of priests to the eschatological harvest through apocalyptic sermons during bouts of epidemics blends the cowl to the scythe; while the skeleton is blended to the scythe through the metonymical links of reaper, death, killer, and skeleton (Aberth 2010:125, Fauconnier and Turner 1999:84, Jones 2010:80, Turner 1996:78). Fauconnier and Turner (1999:84) refer to the Grim Reaper as a metonymical integration because the cowl, skeleton, and scythe fashion a singular unit that can be identified independent of its context. The Grim Reaper is also a metonymical topology because any element that blends with the integrated unit does not alter the composite, but the blended element itself becomes altered by the significance of the composite (ibid:85). In other words, the metonymic relation of cowl, scythe, and skeleton as the Grim Reaper remain intact regardless of the context, or what additional elements may be added to the metonymical composite (Cánovas 2011:562, Fauconnier and Turner 1999:84-85).

According to Coulson and Oakley (2003:75), the Grim Reaper is such a common blend of Christian imagery and apocalyptic allegories that the mere inclusion of Death into a work of art or fiction connotes an eschatological actor who is devoid of personal volition, but acts on divine orders. Fauconnier and Turner (1999:84) state that the Grim Reaper connotes mystery, solitude, and non-ordinary human social interactions. The Grim Reaper as a causal tautology exemplifies why personifications of abstract concepts such as death are created and experience longevity within cultures (Cánovas 2011:574). The Grim Reaper (as a specific figure of Death) may be formed by cognitive processes

shared by humanity, but can only exist in societies exposed to apocalyptic Christian referents (Kövecses 2005:282). The metonymic relation of the cowl to a priest, a priest to a skeleton, and a skeleton to a scythe is a series of Christian referents emerging from the Black Death, in which both skeletons (through the Dance of Death poetry, imagery, and performances) and priests (in real life circumstances) consoled communities affected by the large numbers of people dying from disease (Fauconnier and Turner 1999:84, Jones 2010:81).

The Era of the Black Death

Prior to the Black Death, a 13th century Franciscan monk, Alexander of Breman illustrated *Revelation* according to the apocalyptic writings of the 12th century mystic and theologian Joachim of Fiore (see Cambridge Digital Library 1249-1250:27v, 78v, 96r, 97r). Using Roman emperors as apocalyptic horsemen, Breman illustrated the apocalypse as a political event within Roman Christian history (ibid). Apocalyptic literature was altered after the Black Death, as from Italy to England *Revelation* began to be illustrated with shrouded skeletons, namely the Fourth Rider of the Apocalypse carrying a sword (Aberth 2010:215-221). The pervasiveness of death during bouts of plague and pestilence brought with it a sense of social leveling which many Christians associated with eschatological judgment (Eire 1995:309, Jones 2010:80-81).

An embodied figure of death wielding a scythe, working as a social leveler, and bringing the deceased to their final judgment, arose during the era of the Black Death and was believed to be a prominent actor in the eschatological harvest described in *Revelation* (Coogan 2010:1789n.13, Fauconnier and Turner 1999:84, Jones 2010:81). Jones

(2010:81) notes that the Black Death brought high levels of communal suffering, as death could come for anyone at any time. The Church attempted to console the survivors of the Black Death with apocalyptic images, literature, and performances derived from *Revelation* because it reminded people that pestilence and death were forerunners to God's final victory over the Devil (Aberth 2010:130).

After a Constantinople epidemic in 542 A.D. priests and monks were apparently shunned because of their strong associations with death (Aberth 2010:125). Due to such associations, Christian officials attempted to pacify the masses with rogations and processions that were later credited with ending outbreaks of plague in 543 A.D. in Gaul, 573 A.D. in Mesopotamia, and 590 A.D. in Rome (ibid). According to Aberth (ibid), the conventional use of processions during plagues followed the 6th century examples established in Gaul, Mesopotamia, and Rome. During the Black Death, however, routine processions were universally ordered by the Church, as the apocalypse was believed to have been brought about by God's vengeance (ibid:127-129). After the Black Death in the 14th century, the clergy utilized apocalyptic death imagery linked with the propitiation of Christian saints and the Virgin Mary in processions to end bouts of epidemics, floods, fires, earthquakes, and crop infestations (Christian 1981:42). Such apocalyptic death imagery featured artwork and poems, in which Death was perceived as an actor with godlike powers in the Last Judgment bringing incorruptible and unbiased justice (Aberth 2010:222-224). Eire (1995:309) states the image of Death wearing a cowl and carrying a scythe was a central trope among European Christians, beginning with the Dance of Death and extending throughout the 16th century.

The Black Death challenged earlier theological interpretations of eschatological judgment because death was so ubiquitous it could not be understood strictly as a form of punishment for the wicked and original sin (Eire 1995:249, Jones 2010:80, Reyes Ruiz 2011:52-53). The theological association of death as divine punishment for sin and the pervasiveness of people dying in every class, or social rank were connected with the Angel of Death (Jones 2010:80). The notion of an Angel of Death was derived from Hebrew sources (particularly the books of *Enoch* and *Daniel*), the Christian book of *Revelation*, and pseudepigrapha such as *The Testament of Abraham* (Jones 2010:80, Whyte 1977:55). In 1336, Pope Benedict XII (Papal Encyclicals Online 2002) made a Papal decree that Christians would receive an immediate judgment upon individual death, and the Beatific Vision (coming face to face with God) would then occur immediately and not at the Last Judgment. The ruling placed importance on the Christian notion of purgatory as an immediate place of saintly intercession propitiated by the living on behalf of the dead (Aberth 2010:226). The theological importance of the Last Judgment no longer rested on the reckoning of souls, but shifted to the resurrection of the physical body (ibid:226, 252). From this theological shift, a sense of renewal congealed in the Christian imagination, wherein the Last Judgment would usher in a new era of justice and eternal life (through the resurrection of the body) with Death as the Fourth Rider of the Apocalypse as its precursor (ibid:252).

Aberth (2010:252) interprets *transi tombs* (two tiered marble sepulchers, containing a corpse within, a sculpted rendition of the corpse in the middle level, and an idealized image of the person buried in the crypt, set on top) as depictions of the victory of the Christian over the apocalyptic Horseman of Death in the Last Judgment. While

transi tombs were built only for wealthy elites such as bishops and noblemen, texts known as *Ars Moriendi* (Art of Dying), which began circulating in the late 15th and early 16th centuries, stressed the importance of a good death for non-elites (see Aberth 2010:239, 252). Within the *Ars Moriendi*, Death approaches the character of Everyman, who attempts to negotiate with Death for more bodily time on earth (see Aberth 2010:241). Death grants Everyman a brief but undisclosed period of time, which demonstrates that ordinary people, if only to make minor amends in their lives, can negotiate with Death (ibid:241). The end of the *Ars Moriendi* quotes *Revelation 20:12*, “I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne...The dead were judged according to their works,” at which point the character, Everyman, is reunited with his own idealized body at the Last Judgment, revealing the power of renewal in bodily resurrection within the medieval psyche (ibid:242).

The Dance of Death

From the 14th through the 15th century, the Black Death was memorialized throughout Western Europe in the form of paintings such as the *Triumph of Death* in Pisa and the forty frescos of *The Three Living and the Three Dead* throughout England (Aberth 2010:228). Poems, like *La Danse Macabre* in France and *La Danza de la Muerte* in Spain, revealed death as a person that could interact with humanity in a manner that allowed people to contemplate their own demise in terms of the Last Judgment and thus as an ultimate victory over death and social inequity (Aberth:229, Eire 1995:10, 249, 309). The Dance of Death portrays Death as an embodied skeletal figure, a type of social leveler responding to more than thirty victims whose social rankings are abated in death

(Aberth 2010:231, Eire 1995:10). Evidence of the social egalitarianism of Death within the Dance of Death poetry is discovered in ethnocentric sentiments that hold both a Jewish usurer and an Eastern Orthodox Christian Patriarch in sinister earthly roles, yet Death ameliorates their imminently harsh judgment with the same treatment as a Christian bishop or noble (Aberth 2010:231). In contrast to the focus on individuality in the *Ars Moriendi* and on transi tombs, the Dance of Death poetry, paintings, and performances were oriented more toward social wellbeing (Aberth 2010:233, 238).

According to Aberth (2010:230), the Dance of Death was performed throughout the 15th century as a means to keep individuals and communities from contracting the plague. Dancers in Germany, for example, allowed people to trample them after dancing in order to ward off the feared disease (ibid). The Dance of Death in Iberia, however, appears to be understood differently, as pilgrims in *Santiago de Compostela* engaged in skeletal processions during Holy Week (ibid:237). Whyte (1977:42-44) notes that the Dance of Death in Iberia was performed as a matter of devotional practice, similar to that of Holy Week ceremonies, and not as a means for warding off the bubonic plague as in other areas of Europe (Aberth 2010:230). *La Danza de la Muerte* is also unique in that it features Death as a singular feminine figure and while never being depicted in paintings, the dance was and continues to be performed with costumed dancers (Aberth 2010:230, Whyte 1977:38, 48-49, 51).

The Spanish *La Danza de la Muerte* (The Dance of Death) existed in at least six forms during the 15th and 16th centuries, *La Dança general de la Muerte* (The General Dance of Death), *Las Coplas de la Muerte* (The Couplets of Death), *La Farsa de la Muerte* (The Farce of Death), *El Coloquio de la Muerte* (The Colloquium of Death),

Farsa Llamada Dança de la Muerte (Farce Called the Dance of Death), and *Las Cortes de la Muerte* (The Courts of Death) (Whyte 1977:50, 52, 71, 80, 93, 100). *La Danza de la Muerte* is sung, accompanied with music, performed by live dancers, and conducted in the absence of paintings (ibid:38). Some of these songs invoke the Virgin Mary, with performers exclaiming, “Let us cease to sin! May the Virgin be our mediator when this earthly exile is over” (ibid:38). At the height of the Black Death, Iberia was under Muslim rule and the bubonic plague was interpreted by Iberian Christian ecclesiastical authorities as forms of mercy and martyrdom for Christian believers (Aberth 2010:130). Whyte (1977:38, 42-43) notes the dance in Iberia was devoted to the Black Virgin of Montserrat, whose effigy was believed to be hidden from Muslim authorities, thus pilgrims climbed the mountain at Montserrat to perform in secret the Dance of Death for the Virgin Mary.

Aberth (2010:231-237) notes that the Dance of Death involved more than a personification of death because the Grim Reaper was meant to depict an incorporeal entity or abstract concept. Whyte (1977:79) states that in Iberia performances like *La Farsa de la Muerte* in 16th century are evidence that *La Danza de la Muerte* was not intended to invoke death as an abstract concept, but personalizes death as a singular feminine entity. In *La Farsa de la Muerte*, Death is depicted in human terms, as she is accosted and accused by an old man who claims Death’s weakness, as a woman, exists in her association with original sin (see ibid). Through the dialogue in *La Farsa de la Muerte*, Death is revealed as a representation of the gate of eternal life which is opened in Christ’s own death (ibid). *La Dança de general de la Muerte* juxtaposes dancers painted as skeletons—which represents deceased people—with a scythe wielding female Death

who speaks directly to the audience (Whyte 1977:46-48). Whyte (ibid:46-48) interprets the above features as evidence that the Spanish version of the Dance of Death depicts a singular embodied feminine Death, rather than a dance merely featuring deceased people represented as skeletons.

In the *Las Coplas de la Muerte* version of the Spanish Dance of Death, personalized Death is depicted as an obdurate negotiator (Whyte 1977:52-55). At the end of *Las Coplas de la Muerte*, a pilgrim lost in purgatory discusses Death in a conversation with a soul (ibid:62). The soul was taken by Death, despite pleading for its earthly human life, to the celestial court where the soul is to be judged by God the Father; here ownership of the soul is claimed by both a demon and an angel, but in the end, the soul remains in purgatory until the Last Judgment due to the intercession of the Virgin Mary (ibid:62-63). Whyte (ibid:65) regards the previous story as indicative of how the Dance of Death poetry is interpreted in the Iberian context secretly during the years between the Black Death and the Reconquista. Whyte's (ibid:62-65) interpretation implies that Death is a female that is not easily negotiated with until one arrives at eschatological judgment, where salvation is achieved, or damnation is at least averted, through the intercession of the Virgin Mary.

Death Metonyms and Representations

The Dance of Death circulated throughout Europe as a poem in which Death, as a guide that brought souls to their ultimate judgment, yet without discerning judgment of its own (Aberth 2010:229-231, Jones 2010:81). Death was thought of as an intermediary between life and the reckoning of souls, a gateway to the afterlife, and an emblem of

social justice in the Last Judgment (Aberth 2010:231, 269, Jones 2010:81). The Dance of Death also featured singing and dancing skeletons that came for the deceased and comforted them on their way to eschatological judgment (Jones 2010:81). The Grim Reaper emerged out of the Black Death milieu as a singular representation of death, in the form of a causal tautology, which served as a logical intermediary between life and eschatological judgment in a manner that understood comfort in death rather than emphasize the fear of life's passing (Cánovas 2011:562, Jones 2010:81).

The Grim Reaper's masculinity is implied in associations of the cowl of a priest, the scythe as agricultural tool, and the allegorical connection of Death to the Fourth Horseman of the Apocalypse (Cánovas 2011:562, Coulson and Oakley 2003:74-75, Fauconnier and Turner 1999:83-84, Kövecses 2005:281, Turner 1996:76). The Black Death, however, brought about an affective feminine piety (Jesus as Mother) stressing the bodily suffering of Christ (Aberth 2010:131). A piety focused on femininity is evidenced through Iberian Catholic penitents who stressed the suffering of Christ and regarded Death as a singular feminine being that acts in conjunction with the Virgin Mary (Whyte 1977:43, 63).

The metonyms of skeleton, scythe, and cowl form a causal tautology known as the Grim Reaper that, like the transi tombs and the *Ars Moriendi*, allowed for medieval Christians to contemplate their own demise in terms of an apocalyptic eschatology that includes Christ's victory over death (Aberth 2010:252, Cánovas 2011:562, Turner 1996:77). Aberth (2010:269) notes there was a sense of inspiring emotional sentiment associated with Christian death imagery in late medieval European societies moving into the Renaissance. Death in the Last Judgment represented renewal to the medieval

imagination (Aberth 2010:248). Cohn (1973:117-118) states that two transi tombs—from the 16th century, in the city of Augsburg, part of what is now Germany—reveal how death was realized as a type of renewal in the form of the idealized body set above skulls with wings and facing toward a resurrected Christ. A rendition of the Virgin Mary praying on the aforementioned transi tombs completes the apocalyptic vision of the Christian victory over death (Cohn 1973:118). Whyte (1977:79) argues that in the Dance of Death in Spain, a feminine Death indexes the gate to eternal life because she is always presented in conjunction with the Virgin Mary.

In Italy, during periodic outbreaks of epidemics after the Black Death, funding for artworks featuring the Virgin Mary rose exponentially (Cohn 1992:254). The 1336 papal bull of Pope Benedict XII (1334-1342) was the result of influential nobility who were concerned that belief in the intercession of the Virgin Mary and local saints needed validation, as prior Church interpretations of the Apocalypse did little to ameliorate the social strife caused by epidemics (Rothkrug 1980:45). Pope John XXII (1316-1334), for the majority of his papacy, argued that only after the Last Judgment could souls be released into heaven, however, Benedict XII's edict allowed for prayers of the living to invoke the intercession of the Virgin Mary as an advocate for the souls of the dead to be judged and conceivably exit purgatory prior to the Last Judgment (see Rothkrug 1980:45).

Spanish Dances of Death are done either in close proximity to a Marian shrine, or explicitly mention the Virgin Mary (Whyte 1977:38, 48). Whyte (ibid:46-47) states that Iberian Dances of Death are unique because they are performances rather than illustrated poems, and Death is understood as a singular female representation. Swiss, Germanic,

and some English representations of the Dance of Death are murals or illustrations in literature that depict an explicitly masculine Death, as a hunter who is armed with a bow and a quiver of arrows (Rothkrug 1980:108-109). Iberian performances of the Dance of Death—still being performed presently in Catalonia (Aberth 2010:230)—portray Death exclusively as a feminine figure with a scythe (Whyte 1977:115, 140). The scythe taken from *Revelation* 14:14-20 is often understood as a weapon (Cánovas 2011:562); yet McLerran and McKee (1991:134) understand the scythe to be a harvesting tool, which does not solely represent death, but renewal as well, due to the instrument's association with *Kronos* (Greek) and *Saturn* (Roman).

There are metonymic links that can be understood in relation to Death as female, wielding a scythe, and being in close association with the Virgin Mary. The scythe, for example, as an instrument of agricultural harvest and eschatological renewal, blended apocalyptic Christian triumphalism with Marian intercession (Aberth 2010:252, McLerran and McKee 1991:134, Whyte 1977:63). Beyond the Black Death, the Grim Reaper continued as a composite, in which the metonym of the scythe related to renewal, a trait shared by the Virgin Mary in both the Spanish Dance of Death and Pope Benedict XII's theological ruling (Rothkrug 1980:45, Whyte 1977:43, 63). Female Death was enacted in Dance of Death performances in Spain within close proximity to the Virgin Mary because as eschatological actors, both represented the Christian triumph in the Last Judgment (Whyte 1977:79).

In brief then, the period of the Black Death in Western Europe was immersed in apocalyptic quandaries that depicted death as an embodied concept so that medieval Christians could contemplate and imagine dying as a pathway to incorruptible and

unbiased justice (Aberth 2010:224). The Dance of Death poetry and performances in Iberia were unique because they featured Death as feminine, and closely associated her to the redemptive powers of the Virgin Mary (Whyte 1977:43, 51, 63). The Grim Reaper, per the previous, emerged from a Christian imagination following the Black Death that imagined Death as a social leveler and herald of the Last Judgment (Aberth 2010:252, Jones 2010:80). In the following chapter I discuss how imagery of the Last Judgment, Death as an embodied figure, and apocalyptic justice were existent in Western Europe prior to Christianity, and continued after the Black Death.

3 EUROPEAN CHRISTIAN DEATH IMAGERY

Christian death imagery has a complex history, inherited from Judaic, Greek, and Roman sources (Reyes Ruiz 2011:52). The Christian notion of what it meant to die well was emphasized in the first three centuries of martyrdom and again during the Black Death (Seaton 1996:237). Seaton (ibid:235) states the learned art of dying well was taught through thanatopsis or contemplating death with material culture. According to Seaton (ibid), thanatopsis was used by the medieval Catholic Church to instruct the laity on matters related to death in the form of plays, sermons, ceremonies, illustrations, sculptures, engravings, votives, and tavolettas (double sided tablets featuring Christian imagery). In this chapter I examine how ancient Greek and Judaic depictions of Death intertwined with Christian eschatology and apocalyptic writings to produce thanatopsis in medieval Western Europe, Iberia, and New Spain.

Ancient Greek and Roman Death Imagery

Thanatopsis is a term derived from early Greek thought that envisioned death as an embodied figure, that of *Thanatos* (Seaton 1996:234). *Thanatos* (Greek) or *Mors* (Latin) is a masculine Death wielding a sword, having the face of a corpse, adorning wings, and watching over hourglasses associated with the lives of individuals (Littleton 2002:195). *Thanatos* is a psychopomp, who guides the deceased across the river Styx and into the Underworld (ibid:194). In Hesiod's *Theogony* (see Caldwell 1987:70), *Thanatos* is described as pitiless, unyielding, and detested for his obdurateness. *Thanatos* is not the only psychopomp in Greek thought; this obligation was also attributed to *Hermes* or *Hermes Psychopompos*, the messenger, the border crosser, the deliverer of souls, and the

giant killer (Fagles 1990:103, 660, Littleton 2002:191, 194). In Fagles' (1996:258) edited translation of Homer's *The Odyssey*, Thanatos is regarded as the guardian of the gates of the Underworld. In Homer's *The Iliad* (see Fagles 1990:434) Thanatos delivers Zeus' mortally wounded warrior son, *Sarpedon*, to the Underworld. In *The Iliad* (see Fagles 1990:233, 657) Zeus also directs death by using scales or a balance, upon which he placed the Fates, to weigh the destiny of Trojan and Argive soldiers in combat.

The ancient Greek poet *Sappho* (see Fagles 1996:536, Graf 1991:189) invoked the *Moirai*, the Fates presiding over human life and death, in conjunction with *Persephone* (wife of *Hades* and co-ruler of the Greek Underworld). In Cooper's (1997:1220, 1223) edited translation of Plato's *Republic X*, the appearance and roles of the Fates are described as,

And there were three other beings sitting at equal distances from one another, each on a throne. These were the Fates, the daughters of Necessity: Lachesis, Clotho, and Atropos. They were dressed in white, with garlands on their heads, and they sang to the music of the Sirens. Lachesis sang of the past, Clotho of the present, and Atropos of the future...After all the souls had chosen their lives, they went forward to Lachesis in the same order in which they had made their choices, and she assigned to each the daemon it had chosen as guardian of its life and fulfiller of its choice. This daemon first led the soul under the hand of Clotho as it turned the revolving spindle to confirm the fate that the lottery and its own choice had given it. After receiving her touch, he led the soul to the spinning of Atropos, to make what had been spun irreversible.

As Greek thought began to wax in terms of what it meant to live a good life—as evidenced in Plato's *Republic X* (see Cooper 1997:1217-1223)—death of an individual was followed by eschatological judgment dictated by the lots cast by the Fates. The lots cast by the Fates ended in the soul's placement in either the Isle of the Blessed (also

referred to as *Elysium*) or *Tartarus* (a deep pit of eternal punishment) (see Cooper 1997:1223, Littleton 2002:192). During the 4th and 5th centuries A.D., when Christianity redefined the Roman Empire, the Fates had been Latinized as *Parcae* (plural) and *Parca* (singular) (Forty 2004:274).

The Fate known as *Morta* (Latin) or *Atropos* (Greek) was associated with the death of individuals, because it was her responsibility to cut the lot, or life thread spun by the wheel of Necessity (Cooper 1997:1220, Littleton 2002:194). According to McLerran and McKee (1991:11), Atropos was the vilest of the Fates, she was characterized as being willful, obdurate, and immutable; traits that later came to be associated with crones and witches. Atropos was later depicted in 16th century European Christian artwork as a drab looking Catholic nun standing alongside her more elegant sisters (Forty 2004:275).

Besides the Fates, there were at least four other female figures related to death in ancient Greece, as is evident in the triune being of *Hecate*: virgin, mother, crone; birth, life, death; and past, present, future (McLerran and McKee 1991:66). The other three are: *Selene* (the Moon), *Artemis* (the huntress), and *Persephone* (the co-ruler of the Underworld) (ibid). Hecate is linked to ancient Egypt as a pre-dynastic ruler whose name, *Hekau*, came to mean words of power and was associated with her ability to determine creation and destruction (ibid). There appears to be some overlap between Hecate and Atropos in the European Christian imagination, as both feminine figures were prototypes for crones or witches (ibid:11, 67). Selene's aspect of Hecate was notably invoked in ceremonies so that the practitioner could demonstrate a relational knowledge of the Lady of the Dead (Graf 1991:196-197). Atropos, Hecate, Selene, Artemis, and Persephone appear to have been interchangeable because they are all feminine aspects of death that

were invoked for personal gain (Graf 1991:189-191). Evidence gleaned from inscriptions on amulets reveal both non-canonical Judaic invocations for angels and Greek or Roman prayers devoted to Hecate—for protection and luck in life, death, and the afterlife—which indicate a blending of Greek, Roman, Egyptian, and Judaic propitiations to feminine representations of death (Kotansky 1991:120-121).

The Angel of Death

Judaic invocations of angels and ancient Greek incantations are representative of a collection of formulaic adjurations engraved on amulets that have been dated prior to the 11th century A.D. (Lesses 1998:273). Neo-Platonic theurgists and Jewish mystics used elaborate adjurations to invoke *daemons* (ancient Greek tutelary beings, patron protectors, resembling angels and demons, per the below, in Christian, Judaic, and Islamic sources) (ibid:15-16). Christian and Judaic apocalyptic literature describes angels as being capable of communicating through divine revelation with human beings (ibid:16). Daemonic adjurations, however, consist of human beings willfully requesting the presence of tutelary beings, whereas in apocalyptic writings of prophetic revelation, angels reveal themselves without regard for human volition (ibid). Judaic and Christian adjurations of angels and demons do exist in non-canonical texts—like the Judaic *Hekhalot*, dated somewhere between the 4th and 8th centuries A.D.—yet apocalyptic literature is demarcated by its political rhetoric and lack of adjuration (Lesses 1998:16, Pagels 2012:2).

Death, judgment, and the overturning of authoritative power are the central themes of apocalyptic Judaism and Christianity (Pagels 1991:119-120). Apocalyptic

texts, like *Daniel* in the Hebrew Bible and *Revelation* in the Christian New Testament, both mention the archangel Michael as a prominent figure. In *Daniel* 10:10-21 and 12:1 (see Coogan 2010:1253n.13), the archangel Gabriel describes the end of time to the prophet Daniel and describes the archangel Michael as a heavenly warrior, the destroyer of kingdoms, and the protector of Israel. In *Jude* 1:9 it is stated that “when the archangel Michael contended with the devil and disputed about the body of Moses, he did not dare to bring a condemnation of slander against him, but said ‘The Lord rebuke you.’” The reference in *Jude* to the archangel Michael in relation to Moses and the Devil, is borrowed from a verse in the biblical Hebrew prophetic book *Zechariah* 3:2, but also resonates with pseudepigrapha that explicitly connect interactions between the Angel of Death, the archangel Michael, and the main Jewish prophets (see Coogan 2010:1768n.9-10).

According to Ginzberg (1998 [1909]:6), the pseudepigrapha—non-canonical and oral transmissions of Judaic stories that elaborate on canonical texts—were written between the 2nd and 4th centuries A.D. Ginzberg (ibid) notes that pseudepigrapha were likely corrupted by Christian writers, and while the original stories probably date earlier, their Judaic origins cannot be authenticated. For example, Allison (2003:38-39) dates the *Testament of Abraham* as written between the 2nd century B.C. and the 2nd century A.D. In Ginzberg’s (1998 [1909]:126) rendition of *The Testament of Abraham*, Michael is ordered by God to inform Abraham that his earthly life is over and the time has come for the patriarch to accompany the archangel into paradise. When Michael is unable to convince Abraham that his time on Earth is over, God tells Michael to remind Abraham that all descendants of Adam and Eve are born to die, yet God kept the sickle of Death

from Abraham, instead the archangel Michael was sent to gently coerce the patriarch's soul to heaven (Ginzberg 1998 [1909]:127). Michael shows Abraham where the deceased are judged, but fails to retrieve the patriarch's soul (ibid:127, 151). Another archangel *Samael*, is consequently sent to collect Abraham's soul, as the souls of ordinary people would reportedly leap from their bodies by merely glancing at the image of Samael (ibid:128, 519).

Throughout *The Testament of Abraham*, Michael and Samael are understood in binary positions of good and evil respectively, yet both share the role of acquiring the souls of sages or patriarchs, like Abraham, at God's command (Diamond 1995:77-78, Ginzberg 1998 [1909]:519). The polarization of Michael and the Angel of Death, in *The Testament of Abraham*, is drawn from their distinct tactics while fulfilling the same role (Mirguet 2010:253-254). As Mirguet (ibid:269) states, Samael and Michael are written as mirrors to each other in their actions and in their characteristics. Allison (2003:324-325) describes the Angel of Death as follows,

Death resembles the angels in 12:1, because he can look like an archangel (v.6), and because he dwells in heaven (see on v.2), he is surely some sort of angel. Hellenized Jews would certainly have been encouraged to think of Death as an angel because in Greek art, Thanatos typically has wings... Later Judaism, moreover, personified Death precisely as the Angel of Death... this angel acts at God's bidding... He is often called Sam(m)ael, which may mean "poison of God"... 16.2. Michael, the incorporeal, who is (in contrast to Abraham) obedient as always, goes away and speaks to Death, who is evidently not far away.

Michael and Samael are similar in that both are sent by God to retrieve Abraham's soul and therefore both are obedient to his commands; however only Death, who is sent later, is successful in completing the task (Allison 2003:44-45).

Although Michael serves as a deliverer of souls, he is also considered a messenger, and may bear a resemblance to the Greek Hermes who functioned as psychopomp, messenger, border crosser, and killer of giants (Allison 2003:35, 76, Littleton 2002:194). While Michael is a compassionate military leader, a destroyer of kingdoms, and protector of Israel (Allison 2003:77, Coogan 2010:1253n.13); Death is described as unyielding, merciless, and a destroyer that is grotesque to sinners, yet like Michael is beautiful to saints (Allison 2003:35, 44-45, 329). An analogy can be surmised in that Thanatos is to Hermes in ancient Greece as Samael is to Michael in *The Testament of Abraham* (see Diamond 1995:77-78, Fagles 1996:530, Ginzberg 1998 [1909]:519, Littleton 2002:194).

The Angel of Death also shares a likeness to Satan, in that both are depicted as foils to the archangel Michael (Coogan 2010:1786n.3, 1786n.7, Mirguet 2010:253). Ginzberg (1998 [1909]:49) extends on this likeness, claiming that the Angel of Death as Samael is Satan. Burge (2010:217) notes that a pseudepigraphical reference to the Angel of Hell as *'Ezrā'ēl* resembles the name of the Islamic Angel of Death, *'Azrā'īl* or *'Izrā'īl* (Azrael). Burge (2010:222) argues the *'ZR'L* root demonstrates a regular exchange of non-doctrinal cultural beliefs and practices between Jews, Christians, and Muslims. The common root *'ZR'L* is found on five Aramaic incantation texts dated in the 7th century A.D. and two amulets dated in the 6th century A.D. (ibid:220). The root *'ZR'L* also appears in the incantations of non-canonical texts such as the Judaic *Hekhalot* and the Christian *Apocalypse of Peter* (Burge 2010:222).

In Ginzberg's (1998 [1909]:98, 131-132) translation and consolidation of separate pseudepigrapha, Samael and Michael engage each other in two separate physical

struggles. The pseudepigrapha and *Revelation* 12:7-10 both contain a vision of the archangel Michael battling with the great dragon (also referred to as the ancient serpent, Satan, or the Devil) (Coogan 2010:1786n.3, Ginzberg 1998 [1909]:49, 131-132).

Revelation 14:13-20 describes an angel resembling the Son of Man who reaps the souls of the earth with a sickle, which according to Coogan (2010:1248n.13) is a reference to the archangel Michael. In *Revelation* 6:8 the Fourth Horseman of the Apocalypse is named Death, who was given the authority by God to kill with sword and disease.

Pseudepigrapha and *Revelation* appear to be contiguous, in that Death and Satan are eschatological adversaries of the archangel Michael (see Allison 2003:44-45, Coogan 2010:1786n.3, Ginzberg 1998 [1909]:49, 131-132, Mirguet 2010:269).

As noted above, Ginzberg's (1998 [1909]:49) collection of pseudepigrapha equates Satan with Samael as the Angel of Death, and *Revelation* 12:7-10 refers to Satan as an interchangeable entity with the Devil (see Coogan 2010:1786n.7-12). The victory of Michael over Satan as depicted in *Revelation* 20:1-10 signifies the victory of Christ's resurrection over death (see *ibid*:1795n.20.1-6). According to Ginzberg (1998 [1909]:49) and Burge (2010:217), Michael's victory over Satan, might also be interpreted as victory over the Angel of Death. The victory over Death and/or the Devil would have resonated with a Western European imagination that understood the Black Death as the final Horse (pestilence) and Horsemen (Death) of the Apocalypse (Aberth 2010:252). From the trauma of the Black Death in Europe, a sense of hope emerged out of an apocalyptic Christianity that articulated the final victory of the archangel Michael over Death and the Devil because such a triumph was a prelude to the second coming of Christ and the Last Judgment (Aberth 2010:252). The apocalyptic sense of hope derived from the era of the

Black Death, appealed to medieval notions of a collective Christian eschatology relating to the resurrection of the Christian deceased at the Last Judgment (Aberth 2010:252, Lara 2004:41).

The Medieval Context

Pagels (2012:37) states that the Black Death in Europe revitalized the apocalyptic fervor of both Christian clergy and laity. There were already cults of the dead and cults of memory in place prior to the plague in Europe, which emphasized living a good life as triumph over death, and sang hymns praising the Virgin Mary asking her to advocate for the souls of those in purgatory (Binski 1996:121-2). As the Black Death intensified, the cults of the dead dedicated to the Virgin Mary increased in frequency and became closely tied to apocalyptic Christian understandings of the Last Judgment (ibid:127). During the Black Death, Death was made palpable in thematic portrayals such as the Dance of Death (Binski 1996:157, Whyte 1977:47, 51).

As noted in the last chapter, the Dance of Death poetry, performances, and artwork that circulated throughout medieval Europe during the era of the Black Death featured dancing skeletons that led people of all social classes to their deaths and celebrated in their dying (Reyes Ruiz 2011:52, Seaton 1996:235). Binski (1996:158-163) states that the Greek conception of death as the male Thanatos is transformed in Christian medieval artwork into a feminine figure. According to Whyte (1977:51), Death is without question female in *La Dança general de la Muerte* (The General Dance of Death). The 14th century painting, *The Triumph of Death*, in the Camposanto at Pisa, features Death as a female with a scythe and bat-like wings (Binski 1996:158). European Christian artwork

during the 13th century often intertwined feminine images of Death with Eve and serpents (Binski 1996:163). For Binski (ibid), the associations of women with Death, in the medieval or pre-modern European context, exemplified the gendered discourse of a Christianity which sought to expose the female as treacherous, alien, and aberrant.

During the 15th century, accusations of women engaging in witchcraft and copulating with the Devil were on the rise (Rothkrug 1980:105). The differences between miracles and witchcraft were difficult to distinguish, per Thomas (1971:52-53),

The Church was other-worldly in its main preoccupations. Most of the magical claims made for religion were parasitic to its teaching, and were more or less vigorously refuted by ecclesiastical leaders. Indeed our very knowledge of many of these superstitions is due to the medieval theologians and Church Councils who denounced them. It would be wrong to infer the attitude of medieval Church leaders from the indictments of the Protestant reformers. Medieval ecclesiastics usually stressed the primarily intercessionary nature of the Church's rites. The recitation of prayers, the worship of saints, the use of holy water and the sign of the cross were all propitiatory, not constraining...[However, it] was only at the popular level that such agencies were credited with an inexorable and compelling power...[T]here were several circumstances which helped to consolidate the notion that the Church was a magical agency, no less than a devotional one.

Thomas (1971:55) argues that the demarcation of witchcraft (or magic, or superstition), and religion (or devotional, or doctrinal Christianity) was obfuscated by the ambiguity of which objects or saints could be propitiated and who could perform the propitiation. In the 15th century, the image of the Virgin Mary was credited with driving rampant disease out of Rome and midwives used Marian invocations to reduce the pain of childbirth (Thomas 1971:31, 85). In the same period in Europe, however, women were accused of witchcraft for as little as inspiring lust in men (Rothkrug 1980:106-107).

A duality emerged from the medieval period throughout Europe, in which femininity became associated with life, the Virgin Mary, and the ideal, but was simultaneously associated with death, Eve, and sin (Binski 1996:174, 202). The juxtaposing of the Virgin Mary with a female Death is salient in *La Dança general de la Muerte*, as Death brings a soul callously before God the Father to be judged and the Mother of Christ mercifully advocates for the soul to remain in purgatory until the Last Judgment (Whyte 1977:63). The Last Judgment brought both sides of the duality together in a collision of heaven and hell, depicted in medieval Christianity with death imagery that was at once grotesque, yet with the promise of the sublime (Binski 1996:173). The Christian cosmos is conceived in dualistic images of heaven and hell, and the material and the spiritual; a concept that dates back to Platonic philosophy (ibid:166-167). The dualism of heaven and hell is depicted in medieval imagery throughout Gothic styled cathedrals in Europe, designed to be a link between the earthly realm and the heavenly kingdom in hoping to inspire a conception of a redeemed earth through the New Jerusalem described in *Revelation 21:1-8* (Binski 1996:168, see Coogan 2010:1796n.2).

The Reconquista and Colonial New Spain

Apocalyptic notions of a New Jerusalem were ubiquitous in 15th century Spain during the expulsion of Muslims and Jews (Delaney 2006:261). The *Reconquista* or reconquest of the Iberian Visigothic kingdoms began in approximately 722 A.D. with the Christian victory over Muslims at Covadonga (Bonch-Bruevich 2008:27). Bonch-Bruevich (ibid:27-28) states that the Iberian monarchs of Asturias, León, and Castile date the beginning of the Reconquista at 722 A.D. in order to establish a Spanish ancestry that

was Visigothic and devoid of Judaic and Islamic influence. The Reconquista could thus be legitimized as an extension of the Holy Crusades because it was a reacquisition of Christendom from infidel occupation (Bonch-Bruevich 2008:28-29, Lara 2004:108-109).

Christian authorities during the Reconquista claimed that Visigothic theology and rituals were renewed in the acquiring of lands later to become the nation of Spain (Bonch-Bruevich 2008:36). Apocalyptic notions of the second coming of Christ permeated the Iberian imagination in the 12th and 13th centuries as the Reconquista gained momentum (ibid:41). During the Reconquista, Jews and Muslims were forced to choose between conversion to Christianity, exile, or execution (Barta 2000:69). Christian authorities during the Reconquista reinterpreted medieval Spanish religious artwork anachronistically, claiming that Judaic, Islamic, and Christian blended motifs were Gothic (Kogman-Appel 2002:264).

A tympanum in the 10th century cathedral of *San Isidoro* in León was interpreted during the Reconquista, as depicting the presence of Death (as the Horseman of the Apocalypse) at Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac on mount Moriah (Williams 1977:3). The portion of the tympanum interpreted as the horseman of Death, however bears a striking resemblance to the Islamic rendition of the Moriah narrative (Williams 1977:3). Iberian apocalyptic imagery of the triumph of Christianity over death and its political enemies—for example, engravings that featured the Annunciation-Coronation of the Virgin Mary at the cloister of *Santo Domingo de Silos* at *Santiago de Compostela*—were a mix of Jewish, Muslim, and Christian depictions generally accepted as Visigothic during the Reconquista (Valdez del Alamo 1990:168, 176, 181). The monarchs of Asturias, León, and Castile revised the Visigothic history of Iberia in order to reclaim a

Christian continuity (Bonch-Bruevich 2008:27-28, Kogman-Appel 2002:264). The Gothic historical revision of Iberia was intended to hide Spain's Judaic and Muslim influences, but as a blind consequence furthered the connection between apocalyptic expectations with Marian devotion (Bonch-Bruevich 2008:28-29, Williams 1977:10). Asturian writers of the 9th century claimed the battle of Covadonga in 722 A.D. was not only a holy crusade against infidels, but was also miraculously won by the Visigoths through the intervention of the Virgin Mary (see Bonch-Bruevich 2008:27).

Apocalyptic ideals continued to merge with the Virgin Mary in the Reconquista, under the guise of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Extremadura, who was believed responsible for killing Spanish Muslims through divine fiat (Harrington 1988:28). Delaney (2006:261) argues that an apocalyptic scenario permeated the religious beliefs of Cristóbal Colón (Christopher Columbus), as for many of his 16th century contemporaries, who were obsessed with the establishment of a New Jerusalem and the evangelization of all peoples as preliminary requirements for the Last Judgment. During the 16th century, apocalyptic zeal articulated in *Revelation* affected Iberia and its American colonies (Delaney 2006:261). The colonization of Mesoamerica that followed the Reconquista magnified the mixture of apocalyptic fervor and Marian devotion (Harrington 1988:28).

Images of death and retribution were depicted throughout New Spain in the 16th century (Clendinnen 1990:108). Cathedrals built at this time feature engravings of skulls with bat-like wings, and frescos of skeletons holding scythes and hourglasses (Brandes 1998:195-196). A chapel in Tlalmanalco contains carvings of the Dance of Death being enacted by skeletons holding hands (Brandes 1998:197). Brandes (ibid:199) states that skeletons in the Dance of Death in New Spain were not meant to depict deceased

individuals, but was rather meant to represent the omnipresence of Death, as a singular figure manifesting in several skeletal forms simultaneously. According to Whyte (1977:46-47), medieval European depictions of the Dance of Death signify Death as a singular figure, as opposed to referencing individual deceased people, demonstrating the continuity of Death from Spain to New Spain.

An 18th century fresco in the cathedral San Diego de Pitiquito in Nogales, Mexico, reveals a skeleton—resembling those depicted in the Dance of Death artwork—pointing to a reference from *Daniel* in the Hebrew Bible (Graziano 2007:99). The passage from *Daniel* 5:26-28 referenced in the fresco states, “MENE, God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end; TEKEL, you have been weighed on the scales and left wanting; PERES, your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and the Persians.” Spanish authorities kept apocalyptic depictions of Death close to the faithful as a political rhetoric in both medieval Europe and colonial New Spain to constrain apostasy among the Christian faithful (Graziano 2007:99, Seaton 1996:235).

Purgatory was where death and retribution coalesced in the imaginations of both medieval Iberia and New Spain, it was the location where Death brought souls to be judged and where the Virgin Mary advocated for souls (see Brandes 1998:199, Clendinnen 1990:108, Eire 1995:15, Whyte 1977:62-63). Aberth (2010:272) notes that the Christian notion of purgatory was integral from the era of the Black Death to the European Renaissance because it offered a language of renewal and hope through a space where the living and the dead could interact. During the 16th century, apocalyptic hopes continued to mix with invocations for the Virgin Mary’s intercession in purgatory at

Marian shrines in both Spain and New Spain (Clendinnen 1990:127, Eire 1995:68). As Harrington (1998:27) states,

So began the apocalyptic interpretation of the discovery and conquest of Spanish America; Columbus's reference to the Book of Revelation opened a rich vein of meaning for Europeans coming to terms intellectually and religiously with the New World. If something new was being discovered, or born, or "invented"... in America, something was also dying. Apocalyptic prophecies have always both heartened and terrified; they speak of a new paradise being born, but born out of the ruins of war, death, and destruction. In the Spanish encounter with America there was plenty of death and destruction. The violence was often interpreted in apocalyptic terms—and over it always was the watchful face of the Virgin Mary.

From Spain to New Spain, the continuity of the correlation between the Virgin Mary and Death in conjunction with apocalyptic expectations initiates a deeper inquiry into the history of Marian devotion (Binski 1996:121-122, Harrington 1998:27, Whyte 1977:51).

4 THE CULT OF THE VIRGIN MARY

Marian devotion rose incrementally from the 5th century, when the Virgin Mary was given the title of *Theotokos* (God-bearer), to the apogee of her cultic devotion in the 11th century (Benko 1993:5). Between the 5th and 12th centuries, relics of deceased saints were used primarily for healing and protection, but the Virgin Mary was invoked preeminently for redeeming the souls of the living and the dead (Rothkrug 1980:9-10). Dundes (1980:248) states that veneration of the Virgin Mary made the Great Mother relevant again, reestablishing the centrality she occupied in pre-Christian cultures of the Mediterranean. Veneration in this sense does not equal worship, but refers to socially binding acts of reciprocity and propitiation (Astor-Aguilera 2010:34). What follows is a discussion of the Virgin Mary as a restoration of the Great Mother, a redeemer of souls, an advocate for the deceased, an intercessor in war, a locus for political authority, and an emissary of apocalyptic Christian death imagery.

The Cult of the Great Mother and the Virgin Mary

The Virgin Mary's likeness to *Cybele* (*Magna Mater* or the Great Mother) is the source of both Mary's popularity and anti-Marian theological polemics (Benko 1993:17-18, Carroll 1986:10). Cybele was associated with *Phrygian* rites that can be traced back as early as 6000 B.C. in Asia Minor (Benko 1993:70). Phrygia was an Anatolian kingdom that reached its apex in the 8th century B.C., and produced Cybele, the Great Mother, whose image and devotional practices were later adopted by both Greeks and Romans (ibid:71). Cybele's consort, *Attis*, was son, lover, or both of the Great Mother (ibid:70). The Cybele and Attis relationship is an agricultural theme that resonates with

Greek depictions of the Demeter and Persephone relationship (Benko 1993:71). The agricultural theme of both relationships links the deaths and rebirths of Attis and Persephone to seasonal cycles (ibid). Benko (ibid:20) argues that the Virgin Mary is a Roman variation on the Cybele cult adopted into Christianity because birth, sex, motherhood, and death are common human experiences that the first Christians shared with their Mediterranean counterparts.

The depiction of the relationship between Mary and Jesus is similar to mother-consort relationships found throughout the Mediterranean world, in which the Great Mother was accompanied by a male consort (e.g., Ishtar and Tammuz; Astarte and Adonis; Isis and Osiris; and Cybele and Attis) (Dundes 1980:248-249). According to Dundes (ibid), the Great Mother in the mother-consort relationship was suppressed in Christianity due to influences from the patriarchal Hebrew tradition, yet was reinterpreted in early Christianity as the Holy Spirit. The cult of Cybele was prolific in the Western Roman Empire until it was either eradicated or absorbed by Christianity near the end of the 5th century A.D. (Borgeaud 2004 [1996]:112-113). There is evidence that rites, festivals, and propitiations associated with Cybele coexisted contemporaneously with Christianity (Carroll 1986:97). In the 5th century A.D., Saint Augustine of Hippo described the male priests of the Cybele cult as being womanly and undignified because they castrated themselves to prove their chastity and piety (ibid).

Cybele was popular among pre-Christian rural peoples of the Italian Peninsula (Carroll 1986:104). Italian peasants were forced into Roman urban centers during the Punic Wars in the 3rd century B.C., and the subsequent defeat of Hannibal's invasion was attributed to the Great Mother, for which Cybele was honored with a temple in Rome

(Benko 1993:70, Carroll 1986:104-106). The cult of Cybele along with its festivals and rites spanned from Gaul to North Africa between the 1st and the 4th century A.D.

(Borgeaud 2004 [1996]:111). Cybele's Roman temple was the center for an agricultural festival of renewal, the *Megalensia*, which occurred in roughly April of the modern Western Christian Gregorian calendar (Benko 1993:70).

The majority of various versions to Magna Mater narrative note Cybele's anger at Attis' infidelity as the reason for his penitent act of castrating himself (Benko 1993:71). Since self-castration did not provoke Cybele's forgiveness, Attis then committed suicide by hanging himself from a tree (ibid). Cybele then forgave, resurrected, and immortalized Attis (ibid). Attis' death recurs every winter and his resurrection recurs every spring (ibid). Attis is either self-castrated (or murdered, according to some narratives) with a sickle or scythe; he is resurrected as vegetation every spring, and is harvested every autumn (ibid:71n.136).

Cybele exemplified the Roman ideal of feminine chastity, making her a repository of purity and a source of salvation to those in need of redemption (Benko 1993:74-75). Salvation is achieved through the *Taurobolium*, the Cybele cult's initiation rite conducted each spring (ibid). In the *Taurobolium*, an initiate was placed into a tomb like pit and was subsequently drenched in blood from the slit throat of a bull, or ox that had been placed on a platform above the initiate (ibid). The initiate would then reemerge from the tomb metaphorically resurrected and transformed (ibid:75). The importance of chastity to the Cybele cult is articulated in a poem from the Roman author *Ovid* (see Fantham 1998:118). In *Ovid's* poem, Cybele was propitiated by sailors stranded at sea, and while

the Great Mother rescued the marooned seamen, it was only to prove the chastity of a woman whose alleged infidelity was blamed for the shipwreck (see Fantham 1998:118).

In the 4th century A.D., before the disappearance of the cult of Cybele, the Greeks, Romans, Gauls, Celts, and Phrygians had all attributed war victories to Cybele (Borgeaud 2004 [1996]:77-84). The Virgin Mary has likewise been credited with intervening in battles won by Christianized Visigoths in Spain in 722 A.D. and in wars fought in France linked to crusades for the Holy Land in 1095 and 1320 A.D. (Bonch-Bruevich 2006:27, Rothkrug 1980:42). Rothkrug (ibid:42-43) states that the Virgin Mary was frequently referred to as the Queen of Heaven during the 13th and 14th centuries; a time when Mary was believed to bypass God's judgment in order to bring dead Christian soldiers immediately to her celestial court filled with righteous European warriors and nobles. The moniker, Queen of Heaven, was a title once formally reserved for Cybele in ancient Greece (Benko 1993:130). The depiction in *Revelation* 12:1 of the "woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars" is understood by Benko (ibid) to be a direct reference to Cybele as the Queen of Heaven. Benko's (ibid) claim is based on the home of the purported author of *Revelation*, John of Patmos. Patmos is a Greek island off the western coast of Anatolia, close to the geographical origin of the cult of Cybele (Benko 1993:130, Pagles 2012:4).

In *Revelation* 12:1-17, the archangel Michael defends the Woman in the Apocalypse from the dragon. According to Coogan (2010:1786n.3), the dragon in *Revelation* is a historical reference to the Canaanite Leviathan. Coogan (ibid:1786n.12.1-17) notes that the Woman in the Apocalypse is modelled on the story of *Leto*, who while pregnant with Apollo was attacked by a dragon referred to as *Python*. The Greek Leto,

mother of *Apollo*, was interchangeable with the Phrygian Cybele, mother of Attis (Borgeaud 2004 [1996]:24-26). Pagels (2012:30) states the Woman in the Apocalypse was originally meant to signify Israel, but was interpreted centuries later to be the mother of Christ. Pagels' (ibid) understanding is congruent with Coogan's (2010:1786n.12.1-17) notation that the archangel Michael, the guardian of Israel, is battling with Christian understandings of the dragon, which likely represented various oppressors of Israel. The vision of the Woman in the Apocalypse, or the Queen in Heaven most likely resonated with both Jews and followers of the Great Mother at the time when *Revelation* was written (see Borgeaud 2004 [1996]:24-26, Coogan 2010:1786n.12.1-17, Pagels 2012:30).

The Woman in the Apocalypse, or Queen of Heaven, is interpreted differently according to the cultural context, but medieval European Christians did identify the Virgin Mary as being present in the Last Judgment and playing a role in the Christian eschaton because of the woman mentioned in *Revelation* 12:1-17 (Aberth 2010:152-153). For example, the archangel Michael is depicted in conjunction with the Virgin Mary, as the Woman in the Apocalypse, on medieval altarpieces that depicted the Last Judgment (Cohn 1992:110-112). European devotion to the Virgin Mary was and still remains strongest in Greece, Italy, France, Spain, and Ireland, all of which were influenced greatly by folk beliefs and practices related to the Great Mother, or the Queen in Heaven (Benko 1993:130, Dundes 1980:248, 256).

Marian Devotion in Medieval Europe

Rothkrug (1980:32, 36) states the Franks' used the image of *Notre Dame*—a reimagining of the Queen of Heaven which depicted Joan of Arc dressed as an armored

knight and fulfilling the Virgin Mary's example of the ideal woman, who triumphs in battle with the aid of the archangel Michael—in renditions of the coronation of Charles VII to represent the new king as a virtuous crusader against infidels and heathens. Marian veneration at the time of Charles the VII, in the middle of the 15th century, blended Christian victories in battle with eschatological themes of death, purgatory, and redemption (Binski 1996:32, Rothkrug 1980:32). Medieval death rites in the 14th and 15th centuries involved a Mass that invoked the Virgin Mary, regarded therein as an advocate for the dying individual caught in a metaphorical battle between good and evil forces in the Last Judgment (Binski 1996:32). A Mass for the dying, in which images of the Virgin Mary were intended to aid an individual in dying well was a distinguishing feature of Italian and Spanish forms of medieval Catholicism (ibid:52).

In the 14th century, *The Book of Hours* emerged as a prominent medieval liturgical manual designed for the laity that addressed death and dying, featuring instructive illustrations of the Virgin Mary, the Last Judgment, and Death (Binski 1996:53-54). From the 12th to the 14th century the Virgin Mary was depicted, on the entrance to cathedrals, being lifted from her tomb in full body by angels toward heaven (ibid:112). The Virgin Mary's Assumption—emerging from the 4th century that claimed the mother of Christ ascended to heaven in full body—allowed her to be perceived in angelic terms, distinguished her from other saintly intercessors, and made her the model for a good Christian death (Rothkrug 1980:28). Commissioned cemetery shrines utilizing saint relics and depictions of the Virgin Mary were ubiquitous during the era of the Black Death throughout Europe (Rothkrug 1980:75). Patronage for artistic renditions of the

Virgin Mary in Italy after the Black Death was five times greater than what it was prior to the Black Death (Cohn 1992:256).

Carroll (1986:11) notes Marian devotion was strongest in Italy, Iberia, and France as opposed to the rest of medieval Europe. The cult of the Virgin Mary in France was used as a device of reintegrating people that were establishing their own local political allegiances away from imperial authority (Rothkrug 1980:35). In the early stages of the Protestant Reformation, the Catholic Church used the image of the Virgin Mary in an attempt to establish a commonality with splintered groups that were beginning to understand themselves as autonomous (Carroll 1986:23). The use of images of the Virgin Mary to reconsolidate weakened or strained areas of centralized authority had mixed results throughout Western Europe (Rothkrug 1980:262).

Medieval monastic orders, such as Cistercians and Franciscans, were proponents for establishing a quasi-divine status of the Virgin Mary, yet growing numbers of Cathars, Heresy of the Free Spirit doctrinaires, Waldensians, Lollards, and Hussities were all opposed to Marian devotion and did not believe in the Virgin Mary's power of earthly intercession (Carroll 1986:15, Wolfe 1969:295-296). The Protestant emphasis on election in contrast to purgatory, and the reformers general disdain for saint or Marian intercession were key issues in a theological discourse that slowly eroded Marian devotion in much of Western Europe (Rothkrug 1980:263). Thomas (1971:65) states that at the end of the 16th century, theological polemics arising out of the Protestant Reformation—especially those that favored salvation as a divine grace through faith in Christ alone, over liturgy, sacraments, and clergy—outright challenged the belief in the power of Marian intercession.

Marian Devotion in Spain during the 16th Century

Anti-Marian theological polemics were weak in affecting Marian devotion in Spain because Christian veneration of the Virgin Mary was permitted in a Muslim ruled southern Iberia (Carroll 1986:73). Muslim occupation appears to have provided a buffer to Marian devotion in Iberia from the increasingly high level of anti-Marian movements that affected most of Europe from the 12th century onward (Carroll 1986:14-16). Iberian forms of Christianity and Islam both recognized the Annunciation (when the angel Gabriel told Mary that she was going to birth a son despite her virginity) (Thurkill 2007:27). Islam in medieval Iberia—through beliefs associated with *Fatima* (the daughter of the prophet) and the acceptance of the Annunciation—was theologically oriented toward permitting a Christian piety that expressed the Virgin Mary as the feminine ideal and as a vessel for salvation (Thurkill 2007:45).

North African and Arabic influences on medieval Marian devotion are exemplified in the abundance of Black Madonna icons that still remain throughout Western Europe (Benko 1993:213). Barham (2003:326-328) states that the various Black Madonnas that exist among fair-skinned European adherents, especially those of France and Spain, are not only the result of Arabic and North African influences, but are the cultural holdovers of pre-Christian cults devoted to the Great Mother. High ranking European Church officials have often claimed that Black Madonnas were made coincidentally from black materials or were darkened by age and the elements (Benko 1993:213). Benko (1993:213) and Barham (2003:328) conclude separately that Dark Virgins are not black from being tarnished in some way; rather the Black Madonna is a

direct representation of the Great Mother, which is attributable to African, Persian, or Arabic influences through sustained periods of contact with Western Europe.

Whether or not there is any merit to Barham's (2003:326) and Benko's (1993:213) claims that Black Madonnas were cultural survivals of the Great Mother, the level of importance placed on Dark Virgins such as Our Lady of Montserrat and the Guadalupe of Extremadura are unique to Iberia in terms of their local concentration relative to other parts of Europe (Carroll 1986:73, Harrington 1988:28, Whyte 1977:42-43). The Black Madonnas of Montserrat and Extremadura carried with them a sense of Spanish Christian identity beginning in the Reconquista and extending through the colonization of New Spain (Francomano 2007:16). The understanding of the feminine ideal as the Virgin Mary led to a political ideology mediated through the disciplining of women's bodies, in that, victory in battle was dependent on women fulfilling the chaste ideal of the Virgin Mary and thus redeeming the original sinner Eve (Francomano 2007:17).

Wolfe (1969:294-295) states that the Virgin Mary is a multi-vocalic symbol for bride and mother of Christ, the Church, and a New Jerusalem. Even after the Protestant Reformation, the Virgin Mary remained understood in Spain as an intercessor able to bring about redemption as the new Eve; instead of bringing death to mankind, Mary births the savior who provides victory over sin and death (Wolfe 1969:295). Dundes (1980:250) discusses how the Virgin Mary redeems Eve in her depiction as the bride of Christ. Dundes (1980:254) states first that the writers of the Gospels describe both a Virgin Mary and a harlot Mary. A virgin by definition was considered an unmarried woman and an unmarried woman becoming pregnant suggested promiscuity (Dundes

1980:254). In identifying the Virgin Mary as the bride of Christ, the original sin of Eve is redeemed (Dundes 1980:254). The disciplining of the body in conjunction with the Virgin Mary was interpreted by Spaniards on a number of levels, including the disciplining of male bodies (Carroll 1986:66-67). Veneration of the Virgin Mary was central to self-flagellation movements of the 15th and 16th centuries in Spain, but instead of representing a feminine ideal, self-flagellation emphasized a masculine need for discipline and self-punishment in monasteries (ibid).

Lee (2007:107-108) makes an important distinction in Spanish Catholicism between generalized theological devotion to the Virgin Mary and the power of specific Marian icons to produce miracles. Each Marian icon had its own biography and could be personally hated or loved (ibid:108). Specific icons of the Virgin Mary were powerful in being a divine presence themselves and not necessarily as a representation of something divine (ibid). As an instrument for generalized theological devotions, the Virgin Mary was a source for consolidating power and an inspiration for fighting Muslims during the Reconquista and Holy Land crusades (Rothkrug 1980:22). For Spanish men and women at the end of the Reconquista, generalized devotion to the Virgin Mary emphasized discipline, chastity, and redemption in death (Carroll 1986:67, Francomano 2007:17). The Virgin Mary's qualities of redemption in death, and her intercessor capabilities in politics and war were kept alive in Spain under Muslim rule (Borgeaud 2004 [1996]:110, Carroll 1986:14-16).

In Spain during the Reconquista, perhaps even due to its Islamic influences, the Virgin Mary became a tool for consolidating power in a transitioning political state (Wolfe 1969:299). Wolfe (ibid:298) notes that Christianity and Islam share a notion of a

heavenly kingdom rooted in a patriarchal God that usurps mundane political unrest; Islam however, acknowledges a line of proper agnatic succession that is bore through a specific female, Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet. Both the Virgin Mary and Fatima are subverted by patriarchal cultures, but in Iberia, the Virgin Mary (like Fatima) is understood as the progenitor of a hallowed bloodline (Wolfe 1969:299).

The established precedent in Muslim Spain of a woman representing political consolidation in a male dominated society was established by belief in Fatima as the forbearer of authoritative succession, and was continued in Christian Spain with the Virgin Mary (ibid). As the Reconquista came to a close at the beginning of the 16th century, the Black Madonna of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Extremadura was a Marian icon that, through warring with Muslims, became a signification of Christian apocalyptic and eschatological hopes; yet perhaps because of Islamic influence, the Virgin Mary may have been an even greater consolidator of political authority in Spain than in the rest of Europe (Harrington 1988:28, Wolfe 1969:299).

The Virgin Mary in New Spain

Delaney (2006:261) argues that apocalyptic beliefs taken directly from *Revelation* permeated the beliefs of the Spanish conquistadors. The colonization of New Spain mixed apocalyptic fervor with Marian devotion (Harrington 1988:28). The important role the Virgin Mary played in consolidating authority during the Reconquista was transferred along with the conquistadors' apocalyptic fervor (Gruzinski 2001 [1990]:33, 125).

Gruzinski (ibid:33) states,

It does seem that the “Old Christian” attachment to images emerged strengthened by the *Reconquista*, and that it contributed to mold the identity of the Spanish Christian and their religious practices...many miraculous images were dug out from isolated areas as the *Reconquista* progressed. Among those we find—not the least of them—the Virgin of Guadalupe, venerated in the mountains of Extremadura and dearer than all others to the hearts of the conquistadors. Carroll (1986:184-185) notes the Virgin of Guadalupe in Extremadura and the Virgin of Guadalupe on Tepeyac both resulted from apparitions that shared similar features because the former was a favored icon of conquistadors. The difference in representation between the Virgin of Guadalupe in Extremadura and the Virgin of Guadalupe on Tepeyac can be attributed to the depiction of the Woman in the Apocalypse (Gruzinski 2001 [1990]:124-125). Gruzinski (ibid:125) states that the depiction of the Virgin of Guadalupe at Tepeyac is styled even closer to the Woman in the Apocalypse—moon under her feet, clothed in the sun, and on her head a crown of twelve stars—because New Spain was understood as a battle ground for divine providence, a place where the New Jerusalem would emerge from the evangelization of the native populations throughout the Americas.

Medieval associations of the Virgin Mary with death rituals transferred to the colonial context of New Spain because indigenous peoples and Spaniards alike in *cofradías* (Spanish Christian brotherhoods or guilds) and religious pilgrimages in New Spain commonly invoked the Virgin Mary for the purposes of healing and fertility (Radding 1998:195). The notion of utilizing the Virgin Mary as an intercessor in sickness, dying, and death was already well-established in medieval Europe (Binski 1996:30-32). According to Gruzinski (1990:206), *cofradías* evangelized to indigenous

Mesoamericans in a manner that emphasized the Christian understanding of dying well through veneration of the Virgin Mary. Harrington (1988:25-26) notes that the Virgin of Guadalupe was an apocalyptic sign of eschatological hopes and fears, which facilitated a common ground between conqueror and conquered. As stated previously, the instrumental use of the Virgin Mary icon to consolidate power was prolific in medieval Europe as well, especially in Spain and France (Rothkrug 1980:32, Wolfe 1969:299).

In the context of the Reconquista, the Virgin Mary as the Guadalupe of Extremadura was understood as a heavenly general that was credited with vanquishing Islamic governance (Harrington 1988:28). The colonization of New Spain was understood as a continuation of the Reconquista, in that the Virgin Mary remained the locus of victory over death and Christian enemies through her earthly intercessions (ibid:28-29). Medieval European apocalyptic images such as the archangel Michael battling with Satan to save the Virgin Mary, as the Woman in the Apocalypse, were featured in *cofradías* throughout New Spain well into the 18th century (Gruzinski 2001 [1990]:163-166).

Miraculous visions of the Virgin Mary repeatedly occurred in New Spain throughout the 17th century, and these apparitions occurred in conjunction with epidemics which entangled Marian devotion even deeper with a non-canonical Christian cult of death (Gruzinski 2001 [1990]:164). Gruzinski (2001 [1990]:161, 1990:206) states that *cofradías* and healing rituals promoted apocalyptic Christian death imagery in New Spain through the cult of the saints and the cult of the Virgin Mary. The following chapter examines the cult of the saints in order to further develop the apparent relationship of saint relics with the Virgin Mary and Christian death imagery.

5 RELICS AND THE CULT OF THE SAINTS

The establishment of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire was tenuous from the 4th century to the 8th century, when relics of martyrs played a key role in making Christianity the central religion throughout rural Western Europe (Abou-El Haj 1994:8-10). According to Schopen (1998:260), a relic is more than the remains of a corporeal being; relics are material evidence that the deceased remain active in the world of the living as witnessed by miraculous intercession. Brown (1981:31) states the cult of the saints emerged during the 4th century, when early Church officials sought to assuage a lack of consolidated power through liturgical practices that appealed to the Christian notion of martyrdom. This chapter is an examination of the contribution relics had in the formation of Christianity, the role relics played in medieval European society and establishing a Spanish identity in Iberia, and the merging of the cult of the saints with apocalyptic Christian death imagery in New Spain.

The Rise and Distribution of Christian Relics

A close proximity to death and the bodies of human corpses was considered repugnant in the Mediterranean world prior to Christianity (Brown 1981:4). While pre-Christian Greeks and Romans valorized and immortalized dead heroes and ancestors, there was no inherent desire to be close to the bodies of the deceased (ibid:5). The closeness Christians maintained to the skulls and bones of martyrs, especially those considered to be criminals in the Roman Empire, baffled imperial officials (ibid:7). In the early 4th century A.D.—when Constantine the Great erected churches, shrines, and tombs above the remains of Christian martyrs and apostles—proximity to the dead bodies of

heroes began to be perceived positively throughout the Roman Empire (Abou-El Haj 1994:7). Martyrs were understood to have the ability to intercede in the lives of the living because their virtuous and heroic earthly existence placed them close to God, but their pragmatic effect was achieved through the persistence of their bodily remains (Brown 1981:6). Earthly intercession of relics was evidence that martyrdom allowed one to transcend death (Binski 1996:44).

After Constantine's death in the middle of the 4th century, Julian the Apostate, pointed to the lack of scriptural support for the intercession of martyrs in order to denigrate the emerging cult of the saints and restore the Roman Empire to its pre-Christian beliefs and practices (Brown 1981:7). Despite Emperor Julian, bishops perpetuated the cult in seeking to consolidate their authority beyond their immediate jurisdiction (ibid:8). The earliest church foundations in Rome were constructed on the sites of buried martyrs whose remains were gold-gilded and adorned with jewels (Abou-El Haj 1994:8). Biographies of Christian saints and the miracles associated with relics were popularized by Saint Augustine and Sulpicius Severus between the 4th and 5th centuries (ibid:8-9). According to Abou-El Haj (ibid:10), Christian missionaries in the 6th century used miracle stories, relics, and images of saints to instruct doctrines of faith and to create solidarity among converts in rural Europe.

Hagiographies of miraculous saintly relics and the networks of social relationships established from the cult of the saints helped establish a Christian cosmos in the Roman Empire (Head 1990:14). Rothkrug (1980:13) states that the grave-goods of the Franks were reinterpreted in the 6th century by the Roman Catholic Church as ex-voto gifts, which helped to institutionalize official Roman Christian practices and allowed the

Franks to reconceive of their ancestral heroes as Christian martyrs. Reliquaries, martyr graves, and ancestral tombs were all material structures that encapsulated the living virility and prowess of heroes (Brown 1981:10-11). In the 9th century, Charlemagne constructed reliquaries throughout Western Europe as Christian centers for political and economic consolidation (Abou-El Haj 1994:10).

In the 9th through the 10th centuries, a network of relic trading was established to spread jeweled and gold-gilded saintly remains throughout Europe (Abou-El Haj 1994:12). Authenticity was a concern as clergy bought relics from unreliable sources and bandits stole saintly remains from traveling pilgrims (ibid). Abou-El Haj (ibid) states, however, that issues regarding authenticity did not always devalue a relic. Thefts added to a relic's biography and created new devotional cults since purchased relics were rationalized as a demand by the corresponding saint to be moved to an alternate place of veneration (ibid). Reliquaries were most influential in consolidating local communities, whereas sacraments, liturgy, and calendars were considered universally binding forms of Christianity (Head 1990:3). According to Brown (1981:37-38), the cult of the saints is often misunderstood as favored by rural peoples and opposed by elites. Bishops promoted the relics of martyrs in distant rural areas as it expanded private veneration of saints into socially binding public rituals and ceremonies (ibid). In the 11th century, relics were primarily used in places where consolidation of power was thin, or where Church authority could be strengthened by including recently deceased warriors and martyrs (Abou-El Haj 1994:13).

The Cult of the Saints in Medieval Europe

The Christian veneration of relics arose in the 4th century, but reached its apogee in the 12th century when the cult of the saints was firmly established in monasteries and cathedrals throughout Europe (Abou-El-Haj 1994:1). In the 13th century, the cult of the saints expanded to include the remains of kings, queens, bishops and popes (Binski 1996:69). While not considered as powerful as saints, the relics of nobility were believed to have the ability to intercede in the lives of the living (ibid). In the 14th century, during the era of the Black Death, the triumph of Christianity over death was manifested in the increasingly elaborate construction of tombs, shrines, and reliquaries which were indicative of the heightened status of individuals in death (ibid:78).

According to Head (1990:197), the cult of the saints served two distinct, yet intertwining purposes in medieval Europe. First, the system of patronage provided the necessary wealth to build more grandiose reliquaries and shrines (ibid). Second, the health of communities was created and fostered through patron-client relationships that depended on the curing power of saintly intercession (ibid). The miraculous effects of saints and their relics were not communicated to laypeople through the writings of Church Fathers because their writings were in Latin and therefore had to be directly transmitted to the laity through the local clergy (Head 1990:198). Rural laypeople were instructed as to what it meant to be a good Christian in communities whose identity was centered on a relationship of patronage with a local saint or relic (ibid:199-200).

Relationships of patronage between saints and laity not only fostered Christian communities, but were the source of the relic's miraculous efficacy (Head 1990:200). As Head (ibid) states,

The miraculous did not depend on physical contact with the relics. Miracles were not some sort of “sympathetic magic” or “thaumaturgy,” but resulted from the personal patronage of the “fathers.” They often involved contact with a saint through the saint’s name, the veneration of the saint’s relics, or even a vision of the saint. Such contact was, however, subordinate to the duties of patronage which required a saint to act on behalf of a servant. Sainly patronage was based on the powerful bond of exchanged gifts.

The miraculous effects resulting from reciprocal exchanges between servant and saint were stronger in uniting Christians within a community than theological doctrine (Head 1990:200). Saint-servant social relationships developed due to a self-reinforcing circularity: shrines, churches, and reliquaries generated revenue from the laity that financed the construction of larger edifices, which enabled the growth of larger communities of patrons, generating more revenue through larger donations (Tuchman 1978:45-46).

Brown (1981:41) notes the cult of the saints was the reaffirmation of the patron-client system of the ancient world, in which wealth and power could be publicly displayed with minimal envy and violence. The cult of the saints in medieval Europe brought together not only rural areas with urban centers, but also incorporated women and the poor into a sense of imperial citizenship (*ibid*). The patron-client relationship was, in both late Roman antiquity and in early medieval Europe, articulated as the ideal social relationship because it fostered understandings of power, mercy, and disciplined practice (Brown 1981:63). The social relationships intrinsic to the patronage system nurtured apocalyptic notions of the Last Judgment, not only due to the good death of the martyr, but because pre-Christian Roman understandings of civic duty were already

conceptualized as a particular form of amnesty that included understandings of sin and forgiveness (Brown 1981:65).

Head (1990:151) states that the miracles associated with saint relics were theologically justified as a hierarchical chain of social relationships in which the layperson was a servant to the saint, who was a servant of Christ. The divine power of Christ was thus mediated to laypeople through their patronage and veneration of saints (ibid). The cult of the saints allowed social order, justice, and public penance to remain close to the established ancient Roman notion of patronage, but the saint-servant relationship was problematized within Christian theological discourse on magic, exorcism, and discipline (Brown 1981:110-111).

Tuchman (1978:318) notes that pacts with the Devil were understood by medieval Europeans as ways to gain material pleasures without penitence. An ambiguous theological distinction developed between miraculous events caused by saintly intercession and propitiating the Devil through magic (Brown 1981:111, Thomas 1971:55, Tuchman 1978:318). Women were accused of using witchcraft, sorcery, and pacts with the Devil on former lovers because their propitiations were understood to be an improper use of saints (Tuchman 1978:318). Influences from the Protestant Reformation included a theological discourse that further removed relics from common usage as notions of the miraculous fused with the magical: praying to mediating saints instead of Christ was considered diabolical, and requesting a good death from a saint was understood as conjuring (Thomas 1971:70-71). Personal relationships with saints that resembled the patron-client system in terms of mutual service, oath taking, and gift

exchange were deemed to be demonic, unclean, and conjuring if it was thought to coincide with individual acquisition or avarice (Brown 1981:111, Head 1990:151).

Communal understandings of penitence would further be altered during the 14th century, as localized purgatory cults and the sale of indulgences weakened the Pope's centralized control of the Treasury of Merit (a storehouse of penance gained from the works of Christ, the Apostles, and other saints) (Rothkrug 1980:183). Beginning in the 13th century and throughout the 14th century, the sale of indulgences and the cult of purgatory grew because the Christian dead were in greater need of penance than the living (ibid). This shift was related to theological discourse emerging from the Black Death, as the dead needed assistance from the living to exit purgatory; thus the ability for the dead to assist the living appeared to be contradictory in its basic approach (ibid).

In the 12th century, massive ecclesiastical building projects were funded by pilgrimages associated with the cult of the saints, which urbanized and universalized the veneration of saints canonized early in Church history (Abou-El Haj 1994:31). By the end of the 13th century, however, ecclesiastical building bankrupted the Church and exacerbated an already turbulent relationship between the lower classes and the nobility (ibid:32). The papal bull of Benedict XII (Papal Encyclicals Online 2002) in 1336 pronounced that Christians would be judged at their individual death, therefore, intercession for souls in purgatory did not need to wait until the Last Judgment (see Aberth 2010:226). The ruling was meant to maintain the importance of the saints and the Virgin Mary as intercessors in the lives of Christians, but the papal decree affected regions of Western Europe differently (Rothkrug 1980:183).

In the 14th century, relics were part of an enormous effort by successive French popes to generate revenue for a growing class of nobility in Paris and Rome (Tuchman 1978:26). The sale of indulgences—remissions for moral sin through saintly intercession—linked directly to the purchasing of relics ameliorated the physical pain of pilgrimage and penance, but incited theological disputes among Christian authorities that demanded a truly penitent and pious laity (ibid:28). Resistance to the cult of the saints began as early as the 12th century, when clergy noticed that lay veneration of relics was focused on the beauty of particular reliquaries, rather than the sanctity represented at shrines (Abou-El Haj 1994:16). Public veneration of relics and the Christian dead, however, did not always require ecclesiastical approval or support (Head 1990:17). By the 16th century, the Peasant's War and ongoing theological disputes with Protestants illustrated to ecclesiastical authorities that centrality of power within the cult of the saints had weakened and relic trading networks no longer protected the nobility from rural insurgency (Rothkrug 1980:148). The most enduring ecclesiastical support for the cult of the saints was the trans-regional pilgrimage from southern France to the shrine of *Santiago de Compostela* in Spain (Abou-El Haj 1994:18, 29).

The Cult of the Saints in Spain

The cult of the saints was well-established in Spain through pre-Islamic relic trading networks that existed between North Africa, Italy, and Gaul (Brown 1981:91). In 4th century Iberia, the cult of the saints was considered vulgar on the grounds that it had the potential to detract the faithful from the more favored festivals and ceremonies such as Holy Week processions (Brown 1981:32). The Visigoth invasion of the Iberian

Peninsula in the 5th century brought Arian Christianity and the practice of burying grave-goods with deceased warriors (Rothkrug 1980:13). Roman Catholic Christians reinterpreted grave-goods buried with Visigoth warriors in 6th century as ex-voto gifts to saints (similarly to the Franks in Gaul) (Head 1990:150-151, Rothkrug 1981:13). Brown (1981:121) states that by the end of the 6th century the cult of the saints was so pervasive in Iberia and Gaul that any remnants of the earlier Celtic culture died out in favor of Romanization and Latin Christianity.

In northern Spain, the relics of martyrs extended to Christians who died in battle against Muslims during the Reconquista (ibid:179). In the 9th century, Christianity and Islam coexisted peacefully in southern Iberia near Córdoba, but relics in the north were hidden in the northern mountains near France where they gained popularity due to their legendary ability to perform miracles against Muslim rulers (Christian 1981:126, Ferrero 2013:893). Pilgrimages, processions, and shrines in northern Spain created a sense of solidarity in small communities (Brown 1981:42). From the 9th through the 16th century, Spain continued to be structured on bishops holding the highest level, then clergy, and lastly patronage of local saints in *cofradías* (Head 1990:3).

Hagiographies of Saint James (the only martyr in the New Testament) were focused on an emerging sense of Spanish history, in which the Vandal King Gunderic and the Muslim ruler al-Mansūr were reportedly struck dead while desecrating the shrine of Santiago de Compostela (Bonch-Bruevich 2008:39). According to Ferrero (2013:898), hagiographies presented a model for martyrdom, as the earliest Christian martyrs in Rome were believed to be active in medieval Iberia. The most prominent example is the hagiography concerning Saint James as *Santiago Matamoros* (Saint James the Moor

Slayer) (Williams 1977:11). The apparition of Saint James led Christians to victory in battles over Muslims, and his depiction as the Matamoros was a source of the burgeoning Spanish identity since the 12th century (ibid). Francomano (2007:20) notes how in the early 15th century Spanish identity arose out of a combination of documented history, literature, folklore, and hagiography. Depictions of Saint James the Moor Slayer, the patronage of Iberian martyrs, and propitiations to saints for success in battles against Muslims were features of an emerging Spanish identity during the Reconquista (Francomano 2007:20, Head 1990:179, Williams 1977:11).

The pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela or *el Camino de Santiago* established Spanish centers of revenue and monastic authority through the public veneration of Christian relics (Francomano 2007:20). Trans-regional pilgrimages like el Camino de Santiago formed large networks of patronage traversing local *cofradías* and shrines (Rothkrug 1980:22). In the 16th century, the cult of the saints contributed to the shaping of a Spanish identity through steady support from the Church in Rome that had maintained patronage relationships spanning centuries in time and powerful urban centers in space (Brown 1981:121). Christian (1981:141) states that the localization of relics promoted a sense of community pride and competition among villages and cities in 16th century Spain. Communal competition encouraged ideas that a community was enriched by its local saint and thereby reinforcing its patronage system (Christian 1981:139).

Tales of miracles associated with saints and relics circulated throughout 16th century Spain, but public veneration of relics beyond regional patronage was limited (Christian 1981:141). In Spain, the Virgin Mary was used for miracles and large scale political consolidation, while relics were understood to be instructive for developing

communal identity and solidarity (Christian 1981:126). Delaney (2011:22-23) states that in both Spain and Italy during the 15th century there were weekly processions sponsored by officials at local *cofradías* displaying images of their patron saints. These processions functioned as material teachings through illustrations, statues, and relics (ibid:23).

Processions were accompanied with apocalyptic sermons; rhetoric against Jews and Muslims; and denunciations of witches, devil worshippers, and infidels (ibid). Spanish friars established the cult of the saints in New Spain under a similar paradigm, as colonial authorities stressed communal solidarity, apocalyptic instruction, and denigrating non-Christians (Gruzinski 2001 [1990]:161).

The Cult of the Saints in New Spain

Relics in colonial New Spain were used for devotional practices, miraculous cures, and binding rituals (Brown 1981:111, Christian 1981:126, Few 2002:54, Thomas 1971:55, Tuchman 1978:318). Few (2002:54) states,

[R]eligious authorities in Europe and the New World encouraged and promoted this view of body parts as powerful ritual items but in the form of religious relics and the material remains of saints...The faithful were attracted to relics in part because they hoped to receive a cure or some other miraculous occurrence...Since official religious practices highlighted the power of religious relics, it is not surprising that women turned to the use of body parts in ritual claims of power over men...[W]omen used their own bodies, not those of the men they wished to control and not those of saints, in magical rituals...all women's bodies held power; it did not matter if the practitioner or client was an elite Spanish woman, a poor Indian servant, or a Black slave.

The ritual use of body parts in New Spain was not restricted to the relics of saints (Few 2002:54). Veneration of body parts occurred for centuries in medieval Europe (Binski

1996:69, Rothkrug 1980:13). In New Spain relics and body parts were ritually or ceremoniously enacted by elites for legitimizing their social stratification, by the marginalized for social leveling, and by women of any class for binding (Few 2002:54). Binding rituals have been employed in various cultural and historical contexts, for example, binding rituals were used in ancient Greece in the cult of Cybele (Faraone 1991:4). A binding ritual nominally refers to any formulaic act that is employed as a manner of self-help, in which a victim (or object of the ritual) is transformed into a servant bound to (or controlled) by the practitioner (ibid:5).

The use of relics in New Spain among diverse social classes encouraged Spaniards to believe they could establish communal solidarity in *cofradías* (Gruzinski 2001 [1990]:161). The effectiveness of Spanish attempts to create communal solidarity through the cult of the saints in New Spain, as it occurred in Spain, had unclear results (Gruzinski 2001 [1990]:199). Clendinnen (1990:113-114) states that in the 16th century, festivals on saint's days brought individuals together for feasting, ceremonial dancing, and the veneration of statues of saints. Images of saints were both publicly and privately venerated, as new familial patronages rooted in the colonial context were also being established (Gruzinski 1990:217). Haley and Fukuda (2004:132) note that indigenous Mesoamericans in the 16th century upset Spanish authorities by communicating with deceased members of the community rather than praying to saints on All Saints' Day.

Radding (1998:203) states that Catholic imagery, language, and ritual practices created a discourse with native cosmologies in New Spain. European notions of patronage in the cult of the saints and indigenous rituals observed by missionaries in New Spain—in which bones of ancestors were venerated, but perceived by the friars to be a

type of idol worship—were examples of reciprocal relationships existing between the dead and the living (Gruzinski 2001 [1990]:164). According to Astor-Aguilera (2010:165), pre-Columbian Mesoamerican veneration of ancestor bones is only ostensibly similar, if at all, to the propitiation of saint relics in Christianity. Indigenous veneration of ancestors, Catholic veneration of dead saints, and apocalyptic Christian images of Death as an embodied figure, however, did occupy the same ritualized space in New Spain which challenged the theological ambiguity of who could be considered a saint and what constituted proper propitiation (Gruzinski 2001 [1990]:164).

The concept of death and the proximity to dead bodies in New Spain occupied a place of power and controversy that went beyond what was previously experienced in Europe (see Brandes 1998:214, Brown 1981:4, Head 1990: 197). In New Spain, apocalyptic Christian death imagery was expressed in the generalized depiction of skulls and bones as points of devotions and veneration on All Saints' and All Souls' Days (Brandes 1998:208). The history of the cult of the saints from its 4th century inception to its establishment in New Spain reveals a continuation of the European understanding of patron-client social relationships, yet was altered in the colonial setting due to its association with apocalyptic Christian death imagery (Brandes 1998:214, Head 1990:197).

The mixing of saint veneration and apocalyptic Christian death imagery appears to be intensified as waves of epidemics established a cult of death in New Spain (Gruzinski 2001 [1990]:164). By the 18th century in the Querétaro region of Mexico, the mixture of saint veneration and apocalyptic Christian death imagery produced the propitiation of Holy Death and the Just Judge (ibid). The Christian cult of death remerged

in New Spain from apocalyptic interpretations and imagery that produced the Grim Reaper through the Dance of Death, and extended intercessory power to the relics of nobility centuries earlier in medieval Europe (see Aberth 2010:231-237, Binski 1996:69, Graziano 2007:78, Gruzinski 2001 [1990]:164, 201, Jones 2010:81).

6 DISCUSSION

The cult of death in Europe emerged from attempts by the Church to console surviving generations after the Black Death with apocalyptic images, literature, and performances derived from *Revelation* because it reminded Christians that death was a forerunner to God's final victory over the Devil (Aberth 2010:130). The ubiquity of communal suffering during the era of the Black Death brought with it a sense of social leveling, eschatological judgment, and apocalyptic renewal (Jones 2010:80-81).

Christianity assembled the Grim Reaper icon with the characteristics of social leveling and apocalyptic renewal derived from Jewish, Greek, and Roman depictions of personalized Death (for example, Samael, Thanatos, Hecate, Atropos, Artemis, Selene, and Persephone) (see Allison 2003:324-325, Benko 1993:70-71, Diamond 1995:77-78, Fagles 1996:530, Ginzberg 1998 [1909]:519, Graf 1991:189-191, Littleton 2002:194, Strubbe 1991:45, Whyte 1977:46-48, 51).

The Grim Reaper—as with other forms of thanatopsis, such as transi tombs, the *Ars Moriendi*, and *The Book of Hours*—was created to instruct Christians on what it meant to die well (Aberth 2010:239, 252, Binski 1996:53-54, Seaton 1996:235). The theological acceptance of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary emphasized Marian devotion within the Christian notion of dying well in medieval Europe, in Iberia during the Reconquista, and in New Spain at *cofradías* (see Binski 1996:52, Gruzinski 1990:206, Rothkrug 1980:28). The cult of the saints was another locus of dying well as martyrdom exemplified the Christian model for a good death (Brown 1981:65, Head 1990:197-200).

While promoting the notion of a better existence in the next life, the social and historical processes that produced the Grim Reaper do not necessarily suggest a passive

acceptance of suffering in this life. Death is not merely a signification of the end of a life of suffering and the promise of a new life in the hereafter; Death has been an active participant in the lives of people spanning centuries and traversing distinct cultures (see Aberth 2010:222-224, Allison 2003:324-325, Benko 1993:70-71, Burge 2010:217, Eire 1995:309, Farrone 1991:4, Ginzberg 1998 [1909]:519, Graf 1991:190-191, 196-197, Strubbe 1991:45, Whyte 1977:46-48, 51).

The Grim Reaper as a metonymical composite is constructed from apocalyptic Christian allegories (Cánovas 2011:562, Reyes Ruiz 2011:52, Turner 1996:77). While metonymy operates on cognitive structures that all humans possess, the Grim Reaper can only exist in a culture exposed to apocalyptic Christianity (Kövecses 2005:282). Death is a biological certainty among all humanity, but death is conceptualized differently according to its cultural depiction (see Allison 2003:324-325, Benko 1993:70-71, Diamond 1995:77-78, Fagles 1996:530, Ginzberg 1998 [1909]:519, Graf 1991:189-191, Littleton 2002:194, Strubbe 1991:45, Whyte 1977:46-48, 51). I hypothesize that certain elements have been retained in the milieu of apocalyptic Christianity from the Grim Reaper to La Santa Muerte.

La Santa Muerte is an iconic representation of the Grim Reaper derived from apocalyptic Christianity (see Chesnut 2012:27, 189, Eire 1995:10, 309, Jones 2010:81). Deconstructing the Grim Reaper reveals the historical antecedents of contemporary practices extracted from medieval apocalyptic Christian death imagery. For example, since the time of the ancient Greeks, binding rituals have been employed to invoke feminine forms of Death and the Great Mother (see Faraone 1991:4, Graf 1991:190-191, 196-197). Myriad depictions of the Virgin Mary as the Woman in the Apocalypse, the

Queen of Heaven, the Virgin of Guadalupe in Extremadura, and the Virgin of Guadalupe at Tepeyac were the result of apocalyptic interpretations of the mother of Christ, and the Christian notion of dying well (Aberth 2010:152-153, Borgeaud 2004 [1996]:24-26, Coogan 2010:1786n.12.1-17, Gruzinski 2001 [1990]:124-125, 128-130, Harrington 1988:28, Pagels 2012:30). Apocalyptic Christianity was fostered by gift exchange and the miraculous intervention of the relics of martyrs, because the ancient Roman patronage system promoted notions of sin, forgiveness, and redemption (Brown 1981:65, Head 1990:197-200).

The figure of a scythe wielding, social leveling, feminine skeleton, and harbinger of death and the apocalypse was established in 14th century in Iberia (Binski 1996:158, Whyte 1977:47). The Vatican condemns public depictions and veneration of La Santa Muerte, however, Christianity has a long history of struggling with propitiating objects in terms of who may conduct it, for what reasons, and what icons are allowed (see Chesnut 2012:12, Thomas 1971:55). Propitiations can be regarded as seeking miracles conducive to doctrinal Christianity, but can also be denigrated as magic and idolatry (Thomas 1971:55). As Lee (2007:107-108) states there is a difference between theologically derived devotions to images that represent the Virgin Mary and the power of specific Marian imagery to perform miracles. In the latter instance, icons of the Virgin Mary and saints are engaged in relationships with specific people that create their own biographies of the image (Head 1990:200, Lee 2007:108).

The medieval Christian laity understood renditions of the Virgin Mary and saints as a holy presence and not merely representations of something divine (Head 1990:14, 200, Lee 2007:107-108). Authorities and the general populace, in pre-Christian Greece,

early Roman Christianity, medieval Europe, and in New Spain, publicly negotiated the validity of the miraculous power of images (see Brown 1981:10-11, Graf 1991:196-197, Gruzinski 2001 [1990]:164, Haley and Fukuda 2004:132, Kotansky 1991:120-121, Lesses 1998:15-16, Rothkrug 1980:13). Protestant Reformers pushed the veneration of miraculously efficacious images into the realm of magic and superstition (Thomas 1971:70-71). The effects of the Protestant Reformation on Roman Catholicism were weakened, however, after the Council of Trent provided a Counter Reformation 1545-1563 (Carroll 1986:73, Gruzinski 2001 [1990]:106).

From the Black Death in Europe to colonial New Spain, Death functioned as a reminder of the equality of all human beings in death (Brandes 1998:199). Folk practices associated with Death in New Spain were outside of official Church dogma and doctrine, but were embedded in European and Mediterranean antecedents, and were therefore difficult to eradicate (Gruzinski 2001 [1990]:164, Gruzinski 1990:219). European and Mediterranean antecedents contributed to Christian understandings of the book of *Revelation*, yet their interpretations included binding rituals, funerary rites, and conceptualizations of death, which were derived from ancient Greece and the Angel of Death in pseudepigrapha (see Coogan 2010:1786n.12.1-17, Diamond 1995:77-78, Faraone 1991:4, Ginzberg 1998 [1909]:519, Strubbe 1991:45). The image of the Grim Reaper that emerged from the Black Death as a social leveler and herald of the Last Judgment was reconstructed in Iberia as a female form of death imbued with the powers of social leveling and renewal, and then included healing and binding in New Spain (see Aberth 2010:252, Chesnut 2012:27, 41-47, 173-176, Gruzinski 2001 [1990]:164, 201, Gruzinski 1990:219-220, Jones 2010:80).

The icon of the Grim Reaper was produced through the metonymic allegories of apocalyptic Christianity that emerged out of *Revelation* at the time of the Black Death in conjunction with pre-Christian forms of Death (see Allison 2003:324-325, Coulson and Oakley 2003:75, Diamond 1995:77-78, Fagles 1996:530, Fauconnier and Turner 1999:84, Ginzberg 1998 [1909]:519, Graf 1991:189-191, Jones 2010:81, Kotansky 1991:120-121, Kövecses 2005:282, Littleton 2002:194, Strubbe 1991:45, Turner 1996:77, Whyte 1977:46-48, 51). Pre-Christian forms of Death provided the foundation for apocalyptic Christian death imagery to produce an icon associated with renewal, healing, binding, and social leveling (see Aberth 2010:222-224, Brown 2008:4, Coulson and Oakley 2003:75, Eire 1995:309, Fagles 1990:233, 657, Fagles 1996:530, Fauconnier and Turner 1999:84, Ginzberg 1998 [1909]:519, Gruzinski 2001 [1990]:163-165, Jones 2010:81, Kövecses 2005:282, Littleton 2002:194, Mirguet 2010:253-254, Turner 1996:77, Whyte 1977:46-48, 51).

The association of Death with the Virgin Mary arose from Iberian Dances of Death and the Christian understanding of dying well (Binski 1996:53-54, Whyte 1977:79). The Virgin Mary was an emissary of apocalyptic death imagery in New Spain because of the re-interpretation of Marian depictions in *Revelation* during the Reconquista (Benko 1993:130, Harrington 1988:28, Gruzinski 2001 [1990]:33, 125). The emphasis on dying well in the *cofradías* of New Spain promoted the mixture of apocalyptic Christian death imagery, the cult of the saints, and the cult of the Virgin Mary (Gruzinski 2001 [1990]:161, 1990:206). The cult of the saints combined with apocalyptic imagery as a cult of death in New Spain that continued medieval and pre-

Christian rituals related to healing and binding (see Faraone 1991:4, Few 2002:54, Rothkrug 1980:9-10, Thomas 1971:55).

The contemporary Southwest Borderlands cult of La Santa Muerte provokes the question of why a female Grim Reaper might be used for healing, love magic, binding, social leveling, and renewal. La Santa Muerte has been invoked as a form of binding (Toor 1947:141-145) and has been described as a love charm associated with healing practices (Kelly 1965:108). La Santa Muerte is venerated widely among immigrants along the Mexico-United States border (Thompson 1998:405) and is used to establish social networks among transgendered sex workers on both sides of the Mexico and United States border (Howe et al. 2009:34). La Santa Muerte has also been noted to be a social leveler in disenfranchised and volatile neighborhoods in Mexico City (Chesnut 2012:8). Lastly, La Santa Muerte aids adherents in gaining a sense of agency amidst institutionalized marginalization (Martín 2013:31). Why a female Grim Reaper is used for healing, love magic, binding, social leveling, and renewal seems to be embedded in a long historical interaction of Greek, Roman, Jewish, Visigothic, Islamic, and Western European Christian cultures leading up to the colonization of Mesoamerica.

The intertwining historical trajectories of Grim Reaper and European Christian death imagery, the cult of the Virgin Mary, and Christian relics in the cult of the saints demonstrates why iconology is a vital method to understanding why adherents of La Santa Muerte associate themselves with a female image of death. The iconology of Death in this thesis accounted for the antecedents and remnants of an apocalyptic Christianity that produced the Grim Reaper and Christian death imagery in conjunction with the Virgin Mary and the cult of the saints. Using research from secondary historical sources,

metonymy, and iconology this Master of Arts thesis posits that the La Santa Muerte icon appears to be a remnant of apocalyptic Christianity. While the La Santa Muerte image served as the initial impetus for this iconology, it is imperative that ethnographic fieldwork and archival research be conducted in order to understand the folk saint of death. This Master of Arts thesis established a foundation for further research by investigating the historical and social processes attended to in the scholarly literature regarding apocalyptic Christian death imagery.

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