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Light-Dark and Death Divine: "Bad Mariology" in Colonial Mexico

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In 1531, the Virgin Mary appeared to a Nahua peasant on the outskirts of Mexico City, leaving on his garment a miraculous image of herself. In 1648, the priest Miguel Sánchez published the Image of the Virgin Mary, the first known systematization of the Guadalupe event. Therein, Sánchez echoes the fifth-century Christian Patriarch Cyril of Alexandria in praise of the image, wherein the Virgin inverts the story of the biblical fall and inaugurates a new paradise under which Christians will flourish.

In spirit of the Conference's focus on emergent global relations, this paper will argue that the opening of a geo-exegetical relationship between early modern Mexico and the received late ancient Mediterranean directly contributes to the emergence of exegetical inversion as a key feature of Mexican religiosity. To this end, the paper will also argue that this exegetical inversion constitutes one of the conditions of historical possibility for the emergence of the devotional tradition around the Holy Death, i.e., death venerated in the style of a Catholic Saint. It will be shown that an examination of the aforementioned geo-exegetical relationship fills in persistent gaps in scholarship on the historical origins of devotion to the Holy Death.

Short Biography

Zachary Schwarze is a doctoral student in the Department of Religion at Rice University in Houston, Texas, USA. Prior to his doctoral studies, Schwarze earned an M.A. in Religion from the same Department. His research sits at the intersection of the cultural history of art and the philosophy of religion, especially where they converge at the study of death and dying in modern and contemporary Mexican religious painting. More specifically, he is interested in examining Mexican votive paintings—called "retablos"—as primary documents through which people negotiate Catholic theological ideas, to the end of both upholding religious doctrine and innovating upon it. His project hinges on a sense of theology as an emically sensitive category of historical inquiry that bridges the supposed gap between institutional and popular forms of knowledge production. Schwarze's research interests center on the study of La Santa Muerte ("The Holy Death"), that is, death personified and venerated in the style of a Roman Catholic saint. According to sparse Inquisition documents, this devotional tradition first emerged in central Mexico in the late seventeenth century. The historical record is then silent until the early twentieth century, after which the tradition—still recognizable against its seventeenth century form and having since spread to other parts of Mexico—begins to grow exponentially and internationally. Despite the dearth of known literature from the tradition's formative years, Schwarze argues that La Santa Muerte's primary theological models are Jesus of Nazareth and Mary, and therefore that a historical examination of Mariology and Christology—as they are imported into Mexico during the sixteenth century and subsequently developed during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—answers critical questions about the tradition's theological (and therefore historical) conditions of possibility.

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