

MILITANT CHRISTIANITY

An Anthropological History



ALICE BECK KEHOE



MILITANT CHRISTIANITY

Also by Alice Beck Kehoe

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AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL HISTORY

Alice Beck Kehoe

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For Mickie
Mary LeCron Foster, PhD
1914–2001
Anthropologist
She worked so hard, so long
to establish peace studies
not war
in the social sciences
and in the world

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A shock, and a phone call, seeded this book. Shock, in 1974, hearing three men from Bob Jones University tell an overflow audience in a Wisconsin high school auditorium that Satan is always near us, don't trust anyone, not spouse, parent, child, neighbor, business person—all could be Satan incarnate. It's a dog-eat-dog world, red in tooth and claw; "ethics" will be found in Heaven, here we fight Satan. Then a phone call in 1983, my colleague Mickie Foster, asking me to fill a gap in a symposium she was organizing on religious doctrines on peace and war. Could I present Christian doctrines? I turned to two professors in Marquette University's Department of Theology, Daniel Maguire and Matthew Lamb. They launched me into the history of Christianity and pacifism.

Mary LeCron Foster—"Mickie"—worked for many years to establish peace studies as a subfield in anthropology. It didn't take hold. Studies of conflict resolution and war get funded; peace studies don't. This, in itself, struck me as a topic to be observed and analyzed from an anthropological approach. It led back in time to Bronze Age Indo-Europeans, through Constantine, Martin Luther, John D. Rockefeller, up to Rick Warren. A range of colleagues encouraged this sweeping view: Mary Foster, Lita Osmundsen, Robert A. Rubinstein, Peter Worsley, Paul Doughty, Dan Maguire, Matt Lamb, David O. Moberg, Kristian Kristiansen, Robert L. Hall, David Anthony, Solomon Katz, Sidney Greenfield, and Claude Jacobs. Bob Hall pointed out to me that the chi-rho looks like a battle ax with crossed spears.

Others who came in begin with Pastor Brien, who persuaded me to "debate" the Bob Jones team in 1974, and James Courtright, geneticist at Marquette, on my team that night. Laurie Godfrey, Eugenie Scott, and Andrew J. Petto kept me in the fold of *Scientists Confront Creationism plus Intelligent Design* (in our book's second edition). Thanks to Sol Katz, I met Kenneth and Elise Boulding, John Bowker, Philip Hefner, and Karl Peters at IRAS weeks on Star Island. Anthropologists Donna Brassert, William Beeman, Les Sponsel, and Rob Borofsky working in peace studies are valued colleagues. Nancy Peske, writer, shared her experience with popular spirituality books. Victoria Lewin-Fetter, MD, in Milwaukee fostered friendship with Frank Zeidler, Milwaukee's great Socialist, and Archbishop (retired) Rembert Weakland, who read and endorsed this manuscript.

I am grateful to Robyn Curtis, my editor at Palgrave, for recognizing there is value in this long-term anthropological approach to a literally vital subject. April Bernath, art-historian-to-be, drew the illustrations.

CHAPTER 1



CULTURAL TRADITIONS

To understand today's militant Christian Right requires history, sociological analyses, semantics, and basic anthropological concepts to develop an understanding of this powerful American subculture. Anthropological study of religion has gradually moved from fascination with the exotic to engagement with our own society, yet the broad anthropological approach applied to American Christianity is still a small segment of contemporary research. It is, we might say, a herd of elephants ignored in the room of anthropology, among them the loudly trumpeting militant Christian Right. Thirty years of observing these fellow citizens has convinced me, a professor of anthropology, that the militant American Christian Right is a remarkable case of the persistence of cultural tradition, four thousand years and counting, of an ethos that continues to activate millions of our fellow citizens.

KEY CONCEPTS

Cultures, like languages, can persist through many generations of a society, so long as adjustments to changing environments are absorbed. Worldviews—the understanding of the universe and humans' place in it—taught within cultures, are basic and overarching cores of cultural traditions. They color our perceptions of the world around us. French anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu used the term “habitus” to indicate how the worldview instilled as children are socialized prompts them to recognize what is significant in their society and to act conformably.¹ *Habitus* derives from the Latin word for “lives in, dwells in.” Habitus encompasses the natural world around a community and its members' social experiences. Languages reflect speakers' habitus, not only with words denoting what they see, feel, hear, taste, and smell, but also with metaphors often so commonplace we don't realize they are metaphors—for example, saying a person is “bright” compares illuminating intelligence to physical light illumination.² Religions incorporate worldviews and are part of the habitus a person experiences.

“Religion” is a broad term encompassing physical symbols and performances, beliefs taught to explain our existence and our world, and moral strictures. The word “religion” derives from the Latin *religare*, “to bind.” Religious beliefs and practices bind humans together in communities, fostering cooperation. Perpetuated through natural selection over several million years, cooperative communities are the human way of life. A worldview and its religious expression that enhances a community’s survival are likely to persist. Famous twentieth-century American anthropologist Margaret Mead researched a variety of societies around the world and found that cooperation, and means to promote it, are indeed basic to us gregarious mammals.

A contemporary of Margaret Mead, the British anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski described a function of religion he called “social charter.” Communities teach histories that legitimate their cultural practices and territory. If such a history seems fantastic, we label it “myth” or “fable.” For most Americans, the Genesis story of God creating the world in six days is myth. For Fundamentalist Christians, Genesis is absolutely true, and it legitimates manipulating the natural world as its stewards. A fascinating aspect of studying the militant Christian Right is seeing how its worldview structures its interpretation of familiar American situations and events, to the extent of demanding to rewrite the history of the Civil War and its aftermath (Chapter 13). Believing in a God-given charter, the militant Christian Right is firmly committed to its cultural tradition. For an anthropological observer, this subculture is unusually clearly delineated.

Culture is the core concept of anthropology, while not cultures but the individual is the focus of contemporary American society. Popular books on religion and textbooks on psychology of religion ask what the individual believer can get out of religion. A recent publication subtitled “A Theory of Religion” claims that religions exist to help individuals avert misfortune, overcome crises, and think they will achieve salvation.³ Standing as a participant observer in our society, the anthropologist notes that Americans see each individual person as an independent actor, making his or her road through life. Americans are as blind to social class as they are alert to skin color, so particular to each person in our heterogeneous population. As Canadian political philosopher C. B. Macpherson⁴ put it, Americans look at people as individuals possessing certain definable qualities (beauty, ambition, intelligence, stupidity, work ethic, and so on). “Possessive individualism,” Macpherson’s term, is peculiarly congruent with capitalism; individuals’ qualities are social capital. Yes, societies are aggregates of individual persons deploying their abilities as best they can to produce a good life, but however much we prize freedom, no one is independent of human communities and their cultural parameters. The perspective of anthropology of religion delineates the culture within which a religion is practiced. Its compelling strength is explaining how people are said to “have a religion” even if their participation seems no more than a social convention. That social convention is not superficial, it is what binds—*religare*—communities. In the case study of this book, the

inculcated worldview binds both physically real communities and the greater “imagined” communities⁵ tied by shared ideology.

THE ARGUMENT OF THIS BOOK

A distinctive worldview is embedded in Indo-European languages. It appears historically four thousand years ago, in Near Eastern texts and in Eurasian archaeological sites. By the standards of 2,500 years ago, it is abundantly documented, the language and culture of the expanding Roman state in the west and among Sanskrit speakers in India in the east. Beyond state borders, artifacts mutely bespeak Indo-European cultures throughout much of Europe and western Asia. Two thousand years ago, a radical Jewish sect caught on with Indo-European-speaking residents in the Roman-dominated eastern Mediterranean. Intervention by a bishop of this sect, interpreting an apparition seen by the Roman emperor Constantine, led to the sect, Christianity, gaining legitimacy in Rome, 312 CE. The powerful Indo-European worldview fueling Rome’s military campaigns overwhelmed the sect prophet’s pacifist egalitarian principles.

That worldview persists today, shared by millions throughout the globe. In the United States, adherents are major players in politics, education, and business. The actively militant segment legitimates its ideology by claiming it is Bible-based (i.e., a myth-based social charter). Its rite of passage is to be metaphorically, and often symbolically, “born again.” The “battle-ax culture” ethos glorifying war and competition finds expression in capitalist economics as well as within megachurches and evangelical crusades.

Anthropology’s holistic approach and breadth provide a perspective on the militant Fundamentalist segment of American Christianity, explaining its worldview and illuminating the remarkable persistence of its Indo-European heart.

CHAPTER 2



THE PAGAN CHRISTIAN ICON

In hoc signo vinces, BY THIS CONQUER! Emblazoned in the sky above Constantine's army, then painted on his shields and banners, the sign was chi and rho, the two first letters (χ and ρ) of *Christos*, "Anointed." So explained the Christian clerics writing of St. Constantine's miraculous victory at the Milvian Bridge, at the edge of Rome, 312 CE. The clerics wrote that Constantine, grateful for Christ's support, ordered that the Christian church be added to Rome's officially sanctioned temples. That order marks the institutionalization of Christianity in Europe.

What did Constantine see that day, marching through Gaul, probably 310 CE? Greek letters, or a more familiar image? The sign could have well been a battle-ax and crossed spears. These were traditional weapons of Constantine's forebears, not Roman but Germanic. The fourth century was the time of multiple invasions of the Roman Empire by Germanic nations, a time when German mercenaries were routinely recruited into Rome's armies, and the Roman emperors themselves could be Germanic: Constantine's father, emperor of the western sector of the empire, was from Dacia on the frontier.

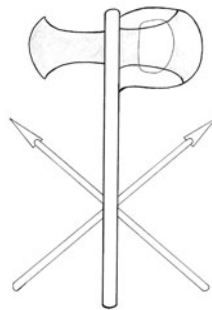


Figure 2.1. Battle-ax with crossed spears

Credit: Drawing by April Bernath.

Germanic religions as well as Roman cults and Christianity were familiar within the empire in 312 CE. Germanic ideology glorified the battlefield, the fighter, the man of action.

That exaltation of militancy became part of institutionalized Christianity. Today, the militant Christian Right carries on that pre-Christian ideology, paradoxically advocating violence in the name of Jesus of Nazareth.

CONSTANTINE ESTABLISHES CHRISTIANITY

What did Constantine institutionalize when he officially validated Christianity for observance and support within the Roman Empire?

Constantine (b. 271–273?/d. 337) was the son of Constantius, a Dacian soldier in the Roman army, born along the Danube, in present-day Rumania, and Helena, whose family operated an inn in Bithynia near the Bosphorus in northwest Turkey. Helena traveled with Constantius as his common-law wife and gave birth to Constantine at Nish in Serbia. The family continued to live in the Balkans as Constantius rose in rank, first as a member of Emperor Aurelian's guard, then as a provincial governor, and then as an appointed caesar (junior emperor in the four-ruler system set up by Diocletian in 285).¹ When he received the office of Caesar of the West, Constantius was married to a daughter of Maximian, Augustus (senior emperor) of the West. Apparently, he had put away Helena, the innkeeper's daughter, although their son Constantine continued to honor her.

It is noteworthy that Diocletian's Tetrarchy, as the system of four rulers was called, was composed of men of Germanic origin from the Balkan frontier. Constantius and his household were headquartered in Trier on the Rhine, with visits to outposts elsewhere along the western frontier; Constantius died in York, England, in 306, with his eldest son Constantine in attendance. Months later, in 307, Constantine married Fausta, another daughter of Maximian (like his father, he put away the common-law wife, Minervina, who had borne him a son). Maximian had reluctantly retired in 305 when Diocletian decided to retire, but tried unsuccessfully to stage a comeback in 310. His son-in-law Constantine, who had given him protection when he was retired, magnanimously allowed Maximian to commit suicide rather than be executed.

This brings us to 312. Maximian's son Maxentius, claiming to be Augustus of the Italian half of the western sector of the empire, persuaded the Roman Senate to accept his leadership and to order statues of Constantine to be pulled down. Provoked, Constantine organized an army of 40,000 men, marched across the Alps into northern Italy, and took town after town without harming their inhabitants, thus gaining the people's goodwill. By October 28, Constantine's army stood on the bank of the Tiber outside Rome. Maxentius decided to give battle, seeing that his army outnumbered Constantine's. Meeting near the Milvian Bridge over the river, the armies fought and, *mirabile dictu* (wonderful to relate), Constantine won. Maxentius drowned in the

Tiber. On October 29, Constantine triumphantly marched into Rome, and the Senate decreed him Augustus of the West.

Two years before, Constantine had announced himself a devotee of Apollo the sun god, called Sol Invictus (“Invincible Sun”). On the way to Rome in 310, Constantine said he saw in the afternoon sky a cross above the sun, and the words *hoc signo victor eris* (by this sign, you will be victorious). What he saw was likely a sun halo with sundogs, the result of ice crystals in high cirrus clouds. A Christian bishop, Ossius of Cordoba, was with the army and may have interpreted the vision to Constantine, who recounted a dream the next night in which he was told to paint the sign on his battle flags and soldiers’ shields. According to a biography written 25 years later by a bishop who had interviewed Constantine, the sign to be painted was not the cross but a monogram that the bishop explained was made up of the first two Greek letters, chi and rho, in the name Christos. Another Christian writer, a tutor to Constantine’s son before the march to Rome, described the sign as the letter X with a vertical line drawn through it and curved around at the top, X with a P through it. The sign came to be termed the *labarum*, a Celtic word. Archaeologists have not found any carving, coin, or document depicting the labarum earlier than 327.²

Plausible as is the Christian clerics’ interpretation of a chi and a rho in monogram form, the sign does look like crossed spears with a battle ax.³ Battle axes and crossed spears are pagan icons; archaeologists have labeled a third-millennium BCE culture in southern Scandinavia the Battle-Ax Culture, from the frequent inclusion of a stone battle-ax in male graves, and postulated it to represent an early incursion of Indo-European speakers out of the Russian steppes.



Figure 2.2. Scandinavian rock art
Warriors fighting with battle axes near their ships, Bohuslän, Sweden.
Credit: Tanum 12, Aspeberget, Bohuslän. Photo: G. Milstren, Tlivil.
Source: SHFA_icl 23.

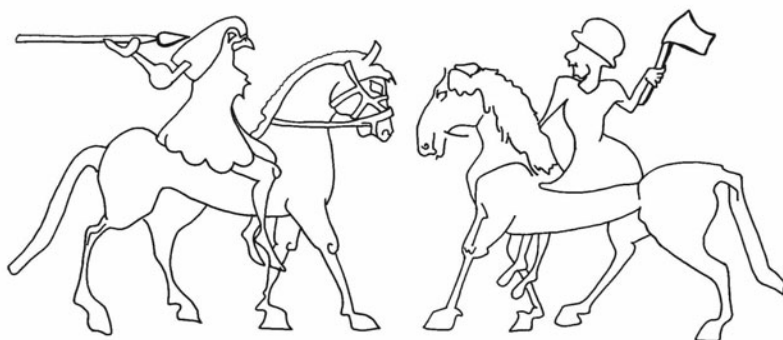


Figure 2.3. Warriors on horseback

Warriors on horseback, one with spear, one with battle-ax, on a belt plaque, 500 BCE, Slovenia.
Credit: Drawing by April Bernath, after illustration in W. Lucke and O.-H. Frey, 1962, *Die Situla* in Providence (Rhode Island): Ein Beitrag zur Situlenkunst des Osthallstatt Kreises, Berlin.

In the middle second millennium BCE, archaeological evidence is strong that northern Europeans identified the battle-ax with the war priest, who seems to have carried a real battle-ax and an elaborately decorated solid-hilted sword, in contrast to war leaders carrying more functional flange-hilted swords and battle axes. Appearance of the sword-and-battle-ax pair associated with a chiefly class in Scandinavia at this time indicates contacts, perhaps by traveling Scandinavian aristocrats, with the Carpathian region north of the lower Danube and the Black Sea-Pontic steppes region that, in turn, traded with Mycenaean Greece and the Aegean. By Constantine's time, the Norse god Thor wielded the battle-ax and thunderbolts, and Odin/Wotan held the sword.

Triumphant in Rome, Constantine had the labarum carved on a statue of himself. Significantly, it was not carved on the great stone arch erected to commemorate his victory at the Milvian Bridge. That was due to the favor of Divinity, *instinctu divinitatis*. Christ Jesus is nowhere to be seen in the triumph. Instead, the name *Christos* appealed to Constantine because of its literal Greek meaning, "Anointed." Constantine believed his good fortune—the acclaim of his father's soldiers making him Caesar of the West upon Constantius's death at York; his successful campaigns in Britain, Gaul, and along the Rhine frontier; and the culmination, his defeat of Maxentius—testified that Divinity anointed him emperor. It was then incumbent upon him, after his final victory at the Milvian Bridge, to acknowledge the churches and worshippers of *Christos Anointed*, the Christians. He ordered that persecutions against Christians end, legitimated their churches and priests, and allowed them governmental support the same as enjoyed by pagan temples. But Constantine did not become a Christian. Not until he lay on his deathbed in 337, did he agree to be baptized.⁴ Theologian Daniel Maguire

remarks, “Constantine . . . sort of converted to Christianity. It is better said that Constantine converted Christianity to him.”⁵

A compelling case made by Alistair Kee, professor of religious studies in the University of Glasgow, emphasizes that Constantine’s goal and concern after attaining the prize of emperor of Rome, was to consolidate, pacify, and unify the empire. Rescinding persecution of Christians and placing their churches and clerics on the same legal basis as enjoyed by pagan temples and priests was a politic act in an empire with hundreds of thousands of Christians, including many serving as soldiers in the imperial armies (accompanied by bishops, such as Ossius of Cordoba in Constantine’s army of 312). From this perspective, the vision on the march to Rome and the subsequent victory served to justify the political act. After his mother, Helena, made a pilgrimage to holy sites in the land of Israel, probably between 326 and 328, Constantine pleased her by paying lavishly for churches to be erected on the legendary sites. His generosity was a filial act rather than out of his own religious conviction (he didn’t go to the new churches), but it also had the political effect of ostentatiously displaying his economic power in the eastern sector of the empire, which he had conquered from its Augustus, Licinius, in 324.

Professor Kee goes further than deducing that Constantine was not himself a Christian. Kee finds remarkably few references to Jesus or to Christ in a context that clearly means Jesus the Christ, even in texts written by Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea, the biographer of Constantine. “Savior,” in these texts, in most instances could, or sometimes explicitly does, refer to God.⁶ It was God (Divinitas) who saved Constantine at the Milvian Bridge, bestowing upon him the saving sign—the labarum. Where a Christian would be expected to inscribe a cross, Constantine has inscribed the labarum. Unquestionably, it served as Constantine’s magic sign, enabling him to be anointed stage by stage, from conquering Rome in 312 to conquering the remainder of the empire in 324. Kee points to passages in Eusebius’s *Oration* for the thirtieth anniversary of Constantine’s reign that imply that Constantine believed himself the savior of the empire, under God his own Savior.⁷ More surprisingly, perhaps, Constantine may not have rejected his 310 identification of Sol Invictus—*Apollo*—as his savior.⁸ When after his 324 victory he promulgated a series of civil edicts, one of them was to make Sunday a day free of legal business, and the wording in the edict is *Dies Solis*, Day of the Sun: “It appears to Us most unseemly that the Day of the Sun, which is celebrated *on account of its own veneration*, should be occupied with legal altercations.”⁹ Raising Christianity to the status of an officially supported religion within the Roman Empire, Constantine neither banned existing pagan religions nor personally abjured his earlier devotion.

Christianity was institutionalized after Constantine conquered Rome in 312, yet in a real sense, Constantine’s espousal of the God of the Anointed (i.e., himself) broke the legacy of Jesus of Nazareth. Can anyone imagine this valiant man of arms turning the other cheek to an insult? Did Constantine give away all his treasure? Live ascetically? Prefer the company of the poor, of the oppressed, of women, to that of men of power? Would Constantine have