

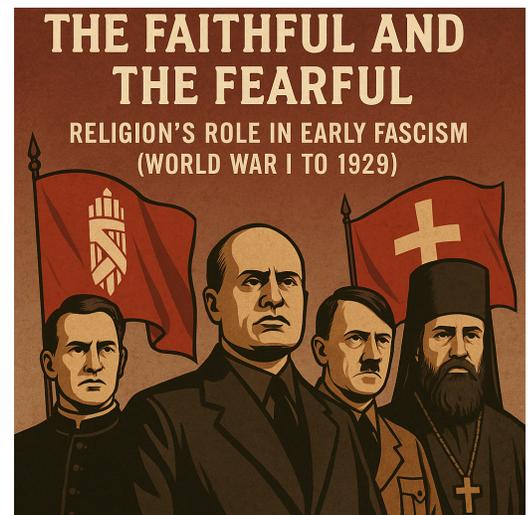
# The Faithful and the Fearful: Religion's Role in Early Fascism (World War I to 1929)

## Introduction: When Faith Meets Power

Religious fascism might sound like a fancy term, but it's actually pretty simple. It happens when religion and political power get tangled up. From the time World War I started in 1914 until around 1929, this mix caused big problems. Some political leaders used religion to get more control, and some religious groups supported them out of fear—fear of change, fear of chaos, or fear of communism.

This article will take you through those years and show how religion, instead of healing and helping, was sometimes used to control, divide, and even hurt people. We'll talk about what was happening in places like Italy and Germany, and how some religious leaders helped these dangerous movements—while others tried to fight back.

We'll also look at how this history reminds us of things happening in the United States today, where religion and politics often mix in ways that make people nervous. And we'll break down the reasons why even well-meaning believers supported these leaders. This journey through history isn't just about the past. It's also a warning for our present.



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## I. The World Turned Upside Down: World War I

World War I (1914–1918) was one of the bloodiest wars in history. Over 16 million people died. The war destroyed empires, broke economies, and left families grieving all over the world.

After the war, many people asked, "Why did God let this happen?" Churches were supposed to offer comfort and answers, but many were silent. Others didn't know what to say. This silence created a vacuum.

People felt scared and confused. Some turned to religion for comfort. Others looked to strong political leaders who promised to fix everything. These leaders knew how to use religious language to gain support. They said things like, "God is with us" or "We are doing God's will."

The war shook people to their core. For centuries, European societies had looked to the church as the center of life. But during the war, the church seemed unable to stop the bloodshed. Many people started to feel that maybe the church had lost its power. Others clung even more tightly to faith, hoping it would bring peace.

Today in the U.S., we also hear political leaders use religion to make their case—whether about immigration, race, or laws. This should make us pause and think about the past. When people are afraid, they are more likely to trust leaders who say they speak for God. But history shows that those words can be used for dangerous purposes.

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## **II. A Lost World Looks for Direction**

After the war, many people stopped believing in democracy. They didn't trust politicians. Countries like Germany, Italy, and Russia were filled with unemployed people, rising prices, and broken governments. Veterans came home to find no jobs and no hope.

That's when fascist movements grew. Fascist leaders said, "We will make our country great again. We will bring order." They didn't want debate or freedom. They wanted control. They also knew that religion could help them gain that control.

Religion was powerful. It had deep traditions, clear rules, and strong emotions. If fascists could link their message to religion, they could pull people in.

Some churches supported fascists because they hated communists even more. Communists wanted to get rid of religion. Church leaders thought, "Better to join with the fascists than be destroyed by the communists."

Religious services in these times were often filled with patriotic songs, symbols, and sermons that talked about the nation's divine purpose. Preachers and priests told their congregations that the nation was chosen by God, and that it had a mission to purify itself.

In America today, many churches are still politically active. Some support certain political parties almost completely. This raises old questions: Should faith be used to gain power? Or to guide people toward love and justice? Is it possible to follow Jesus and still support policies that hurt the poor, the immigrant, or the outcast?

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## **III. Mussolini and the Catholic Church in Italy**

Benito Mussolini took power in Italy in 1922. At first, he mocked religion. He didn't care about the church. But he soon realized that working with the Catholic Church could give him more power.

In 1929, Mussolini made a deal with the Pope. This deal, called the Lateran Treaty, gave the Church its own country (Vatican City), money, and special rights. In return, the Church supported Mussolini's rule.

Suddenly, Mussolini started using Catholic symbols. He talked about family values, authority, and how Italy was chosen by God to be great. Priests blessed soldiers. Children were taught to love Mussolini and God at the same time.

Some church leaders were nervous. They didn't like Mussolini's violence. But most stayed quiet. They were just happy he was keeping the communists away.

This partnership helped Mussolini build a society where questioning authority was seen as sinful. Obeying the state became part of religious duty. Mussolini was often portrayed as a kind of modern-day Roman emperor, chosen by fate and blessed by the church.

This sounds familiar. In today's America, some religious leaders turn a blind eye to cruelty or corruption, as long as the politician promises to fight abortion, support Israel, or keep "traditional values."

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#### IV. Hitler, the Nazis, and German Churches

Germany after World War I was a total mess. Inflation made money worthless. People were starving. Many Germans were angry and looking for someone to blame. They blamed Jews, communists, and their weak democratic government.

Adolf Hitler stepped in with powerful speeches and a clear enemy. He talked about purity and the soul of the German people. He also used Christian words. He said he was doing God's work and defending Christian values.

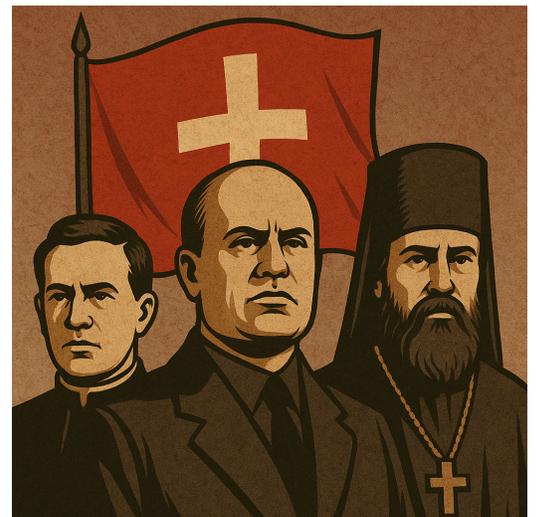
Some Protestant groups called themselves "German Christians." They believed Hitler was chosen by God. They removed the Old Testament from their Bibles and claimed Jesus wasn't Jewish (which is false).

The Catholic Church also made a deal with Hitler in 1933. This deal was called the Concordat. The Church promised to stay out of politics. Hitler promised to protect church rights. But, like many promises Hitler made, he didn't keep it. He shut down Catholic schools and arrested priests who spoke out.

One brave man was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He helped start the Confessing Church, which said, "Jesus is our leader, not Hitler." He was arrested and later executed.

Bonhoeffer's story reminds us that not everyone followed blindly. Some people of faith risked everything to do what was right. But they were the minority. Most churches gave in to fear and power.

Fast forward to today. Many American churches are divided. Some speak up for justice. Others support political power no matter what. This split isn't new. It happened in Germany, too. And the cost of staying silent can be enormous.



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#### V. Eastern Europe: Faith and National Identity

In Eastern Europe, religion and nationalism were tied together. In Romania, Hungary, and Yugoslavia, being part of the main church was seen as being a "true" citizen.

In Romania, a group called the Iron Guard mixed Orthodox Christianity with violent nationalism. They said Jews and outsiders were enemies of God and country. They believed that dying for your religion and your country was holy.

In Hungary and other countries, churches supported strong leaders who promised to fight communism and protect traditional family roles. Women were told to stay home. Minorities were told to keep quiet or leave.

This wasn't just about politics. It was about identity. If you weren't the right religion, you weren't considered part of the nation. This made it easy to justify hate, discrimination, and violence.

This sounds a lot like some political voices in the U.S. today who say, "Real Americans are Christian, straight, and conservative." That kind of thinking leads to division and hate. And when churches support it, they stop being a place of healing and become part of the problem.

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## **VI. Echoes Around the World**

Europe wasn't the only place where religion was used in harmful ways. In Spain, some Catholic leaders supported violent rulers who claimed to fight communism.

In the United States, a Catholic priest named Father Charles Coughlin had a radio show that reached millions. He talked about Christian values but also praised fascist leaders in Europe. He blamed Jews for economic problems and spread hate.

Coughlin claimed to speak for the "common man." But his message was filled with division and fear. He said that certain groups were ruining the country, and that only a strong leader could save America. Sound familiar?

Many religious leaders pushed back. Jewish, Protestant, and Catholic voices warned that religion should never be used to spread hate or give unchecked power to any one leader.

Theologians like Karl Barth and Reinhold Niebuhr said religion should care for the poor, stand for truth, and resist tyranny. They reminded people that faith means loving your neighbor, not fearing them.

We need that reminder now more than ever. When religion becomes a weapon, everyone loses.

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## **VII. Why Did Faith Turn Toward Fascism?**

So why did religious groups support fascists?

- Fear of Change: The world was moving fast. Old traditions were crumbling. People clung to religion as a steady anchor.
- Fear of Communism: Communists wanted to end religion. Many thought it was better to join the fascists than risk losing their faith entirely.
- Desire for Order: After war and chaos, people longed for peace, even if it meant giving up freedom.
- Smart Manipulation: Leaders like Hitler and Mussolini knew how to use religion to look trustworthy. They spoke the right words and used the right symbols.

But this came with a price. Churches became tools of the government. They stopped speaking out against injustice. They lost their moral authority.

When churches bless violence, ignore lies, or stay silent in the face of suffering, they betray their own message.

Today, we see churches in the U.S. wrestle with similar problems. Should they speak truth to power? Or keep quiet to stay safe? Should they call out racism, greed, and corruption? Or should they protect their influence?

These aren't easy questions. But they are necessary ones.

## WHY RELIGION TURNED TO FASCISM

- FEAR OF CHANGE
- FEAR OF COMMUNISM
- DESIRE FOR ORDER
- MANIPULATION

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From 1914 to 1929, the world changed forever. War, fear, and loss created a space where dangerous leaders stepped in. These leaders didn't just use guns and laws. They used faith.

Some religious people supported them, hoping they were doing the right thing. Others stayed silent. A brave few spoke out.

This part of history shows us what can happen when religion stops being a moral guide and becomes a political tool. Faith should lift people up, not push them down. It should protect the weak, not power the strong.

And today, in the United States, we are facing some of the same questions.

- Should religion be used to win elections?
- Should churches stay quiet when leaders abuse their power?
- Should faith be about control or about love?

History shows us what can go wrong. But it also shows us that people can resist. They can speak up. They can choose to keep religion sacred, not political.

The story of religious fascism didn't end in 1929. It was just beginning. And even now, in our time, we need to stay awake to the dangers of mixing faith with fear, and politics with prayer.

**Because if we forget the past, we risk repeating it.**