

The Roots of Religious Fascism (1935–1941)

How Religion and Power Teamed Up—And Why That Still Matters Today

Introduction: When Faith and Power Shake Hands

Between 1935 and 1941, the world sat on a powder keg. Tensions were rising fast—war seemed inevitable, communism was spreading, and old social orders felt under attack. In times like these, people often turn to religion. It can offer comfort, purpose, and a sense of community.

But sometimes, religion gets pulled into something darker.

During this period, fascist leaders in Europe and Asia used religion as a political weapon. They weren't just leading prayers—they were using faith to push propaganda, stir fear, justify violence, and tighten their grip on power.

And while this may sound like old history, many of the same strategies are popping up again today. To stop history from repeating, we need to understand how—and why—religion became a tool for authoritarian rule in the years leading up to World War II.



1935: Trouble Brewing

By 1935, the world hadn't exploded into total war yet—but it was getting close. In Germany, Adolf Hitler had been in power for two years. Benito Mussolini had turned Italy into a one-party state. Japan had already invaded parts of China, and Spain was sliding into civil war.

Each of these countries had something in common: their leaders used religion to boost their power and rally the public. Churches and temples often went along, either out of fear, self-interest, or a belief that they were protecting people from something worse—usually communism.

Germany: The Cross Meets the Swastika

The Catholic Church's Deal with Hitler

In 1933, the Vatican signed the *Reichskonkordat* with Hitler's regime. The Catholic Church was promised religious freedom in exchange for staying out of German politics. At first, it seemed like a win for the Church—it could keep its schools, parishes, and influence.

But the Nazis quickly broke the deal. Catholic youth groups were shut down. Religious newspapers were censored. Priests who spoke out were arrested or even executed. The Church's silence in return allowed Hitler to build a dictatorship with little resistance from one of Germany's most powerful institutions.

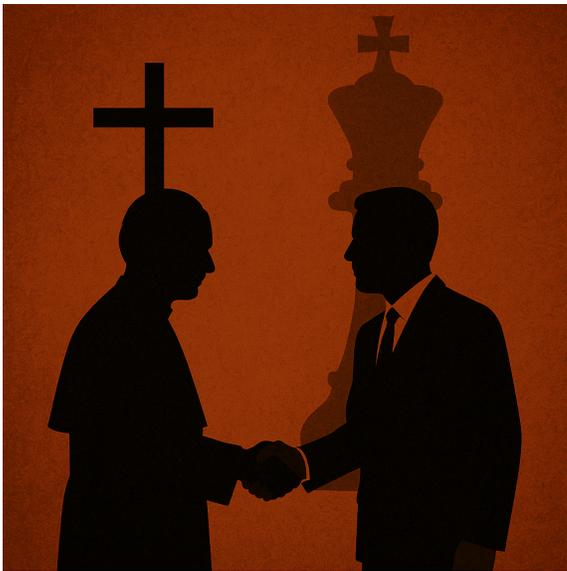
Protestant Churches and “Positive Christianity”

In the Protestant world, a Nazi-aligned group called the “German Christians” pushed to reshape Christianity into something more Aryan. They claimed Jesus wasn't Jewish. They replaced crosses with swastikas. They even rewrote hymns to support Hitler.

Not all Protestants followed. Some pastors—like Dietrich Bonhoeffer—formed the *Confessing Church*, which resisted Nazi control. Many of them were arrested, and some were killed. Still, many churches remained quiet or compliant.

 **Today's Echo:** When political leaders today say their policies are “God's will” or wrap their campaigns in religious symbols, they're borrowing tactics from this era.

Italy: Mussolini Finds His Religion



Benito Mussolini started out as an atheist and critic of the Church. But once in power, he realized religion could be politically useful. In 1929, he signed the *Lateran Treaty* with the Vatican, recognizing Vatican City as an independent state and giving the Church money and privileges.

In return, the Catholic Church backed Mussolini. Priests blessed soldiers before war. Bishops praised fascist values. Even during Italy's brutal invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, religious leaders often stayed silent—or cheered it on.

 **Today's Echo:** Around the world today, some churches still back strongman leaders as long as they promise to “defend Christian values,” no matter what else they do.

Spain: Franco's Holy Crusade

In 1936, Spain descended into civil war. General Francisco Franco led the Nationalists—fascist-leaning conservatives—against the Republicans, a mix of socialists, democrats, and anarchists.

The Catholic Church declared Franco's war a “holy crusade.” Priests blessed fascist troops and encouraged obedience. When Franco won in 1939, he turned Spain into a theocratic dictatorship. Catholicism became the official—and only—legal religion. Dissenters, including Protestant ministers and Jews, were imprisoned, tortured, or killed.

 **Today's Echo:** Some modern political groups still talk about waging a “spiritual war” for their country's soul, promoting one religion as superior and trying to silence others.

Eastern Europe: Religion and Ethnic Purity

In Hungary, Romania, and Croatia, fascist groups mixed faith with fierce nationalism. Churches helped these regimes push antisemitic and anti-minority laws.

The worst example was the Ustaše regime in Croatia. Backed by the Catholic Church, this ultra-nationalist group took power in 1941 and ran death camps. They forced thousands of Orthodox Christians, Jews, and Muslims to convert—or die. Some Catholic clergy participated directly in the violence.

 **Today's Echo:** When religion becomes tied to nationalism, it often divides people into “us” and “them.” That mindset still shows up today in hate speech and violence against immigrants, Muslims, Jews, and LGBTQ+ people.

Japan: Worshiping the State

Japan's fascism didn't involve Christianity—it used Shinto, a traditional Japanese religion. Under *State Shinto*, the emperor was worshiped as a god, and loyalty to the state became a religious duty.

Children were taught to bow to the emperor's portrait. Soldiers believed they were dying for divine honor. Questioning the government was treated as heresy. By 1941, Japan was fully committed to religious nationalism—helping justify brutal invasions of China, Korea, and Southeast Asia.

 **Today's Echo:** Even now, some leaders claim they're chosen by God or fate. They say disagreeing with them is treason—or even evil.

The U.S.: A Softer Slide

The U.S. didn't have a fascist government during this time—but it wasn't immune to religious extremism.

Father Charles Coughlin, a Catholic priest, became one of the most influential voices in America through his weekly radio broadcasts, reaching over 30 million listeners. At first, he focused on economic justice. But by the late 1930s, his tone shifted. He praised Hitler and Mussolini, blamed Jews for financial problems, and called for a Christian-based nationalism.

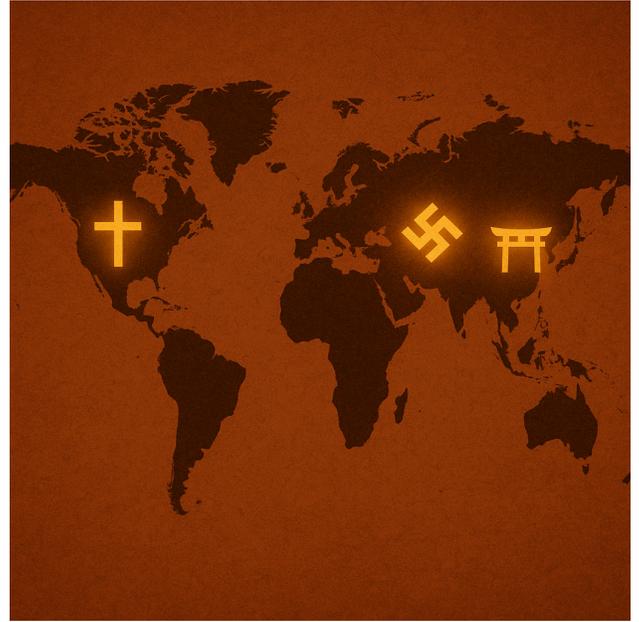
Eventually, the Church forced him off the air. But his movement showed how quickly religious messages could be twisted into hate and fear.

 **Today's Echo:** Many modern influencers use podcasts and social media to spread similar ideas—mixing religion with conspiracy theories, fear, and nationalism.

Comparing Then and Now

So how does all of this connect to today?

- **Christian Nationalism:** In the U.S., some political groups claim the country was founded as a Christian nation and should be run by biblical law. They want their religious views written into national policy.
- **Weaponized “Religious Freedom”:** Some so-called religious freedom laws are used not to protect belief, but to deny services or rights to certain groups—especially LGBTQ+ people or non-Christians.
- **Conspiracies with a Holy Twist:** Movements like QAnon use religious language to push ideas about secret wars between good and evil. Followers believe they’re “chosen” to see the truth.
- **Power for Loyalty:** Some churches align with powerful political figures—not because those leaders live morally, but because they promise to fight the “right” enemies.



● **When religion stops being about compassion and becomes a tool for control, it loses its soul. And that’s when fascism finds a foothold.**

Why This History Still Matters

From 1935 to 1941, religious fascism helped tear apart democracies and spark World War II. It gave dangerous leaders a holy mask. It made hate look righteous. It let ordinary people believe they were serving God—while hurting others.

Religion can be beautiful. It can comfort the hurting, guide the lost, and bring people together. But when it’s mixed with unchecked power, it can become a weapon.

That’s why we need the separation of church and state. That’s why we need to protect freedom of belief—for *everyone*. And that’s why we need to study this history—so we can see the signs before it’s too late.

Conclusion: Watch the Signs

From Nazi Germany to Imperial Japan, from Spain to the U.S., the years 1935 to 1941 show us what happens when people are scared and religion is used to calm them—not with truth, but with obedience.

If a leader shows up holding a Bible in one hand and a sword in the other, history says: be careful.

Religious fascism isn’t just something in the past. It’s a pattern. And the only way to stop it is to recognize it early, ask tough questions, and remember that real faith doesn’t need to crush others to survive.

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