

# Religious Fascism from 1946 to 1960: Lessons for Today

## Introduction: A Dangerous Mix

World War II ended in 1945, leaving much of the world in ruins. Cities were destroyed, millions of people were dead, and families were torn apart. Fascist leaders like Adolf Hitler in Germany and Benito Mussolini in Italy had been defeated, but their ideas didn't completely disappear. Instead of dying out, some of those ideas changed form. They blended into new movements—especially those that used religion to gain control.

Between 1946 and 1960, a troubling pattern started to show up. In the United States and in other countries, religion was used not just for worship but as a political tool. Powerful leaders—politicians, pastors, and even media figures—mixed faith with extreme nationalism. This mix, known as religious fascism, made people feel proud, holy, and patriotic. But behind the slogans and hymns, it often led to fear, hate, and control.

Why does this matter today? Because we're seeing the same warning signs again. Many people are using religion to push their politics, silence others, and take away rights. By studying what happened in the years after World War II, we can learn to recognize—and stop—these dangers before they grow stronger.

---

## 1. The World After the War

In 1946, the world was still recovering from the war. Europe was devastated. Japan was rebuilding after the atomic bomb. The United States, although not physically damaged like other countries, was dealing with a new fear: the rise of communism.

Communism, especially from the Soviet Union, was viewed by many in the West as a threat to freedom, capitalism, and religion. In communist countries, religious institutions were often shut down or tightly controlled. This scared people in the U.S. and Western Europe, especially religious leaders, who feared their churches and values were under attack.

In reaction, many Americans turned to religion not just for comfort but as a defense. They believed that standing strong in their faith would protect their country from the “godless” communists. But some religious and political leaders went even further. They didn't just promote faith—they used it to demand loyalty, silence critics, and draw a line between “true Americans” and everyone else.

This became the perfect environment for religious fascism to grow.

---

## 2. The Red Scare and Religion in the U.S.

By the late 1940s and early 1950s, the United States was in full panic mode over communism. This period, known as the Red Scare, led people to suspect their neighbors, teachers, movie stars, and politicians of being

secret communists. Senator Joseph McCarthy led a wave of investigations, accusing people of being disloyal without strong evidence. Just an accusation could ruin someone's career.

During this time, religion was pulled into politics like never before. Many Christian leaders gave sermons linking patriotism with faith. They preached that communism was not just a political danger—it was evil and anti-Christian. Some said that true Americans had to believe in God, go to church, and follow traditional values. If you didn't, you were seen as suspicious or even dangerous.

Political leaders joined in. President Dwight D. Eisenhower once said, "Our government makes no sense unless it is founded on a deeply felt religious faith—and I don't care what it is." That sounds tolerant, but in practice, most of the focus was on Christianity—especially Protestant Christianity.

Churches and politicians worked together to promote "American values," which often meant being religious, obedient, and conservative. If you questioned that message, you risked being labeled un-American.

---

### 3. Christian Nationalism on the Rise

Christian nationalism is the belief that the United States was founded as a Christian nation and should be ruled by Christian principles. During the 1950s, this idea grew stronger in American culture and politics.

Evangelist Billy Graham became one of the most powerful religious voices in the country. His revival events, known as "crusades," were broadcast on TV and radio to millions. Graham preached that America needed to return to God, fight sin, and stand against communism. He didn't just talk about faith—he mixed it with politics, often supporting conservative policies and leaders.

Two major changes during this time helped lock religion into the government:

- In 1954, Congress added the words "under God" to the Pledge of Allegiance.
- In 1956, "In God We Trust" became the official national motto, replacing the original motto, "E Pluribus Unum" ("Out of many, one").

These moves were meant to show that America was morally different from the Soviet Union. But they also sent a message: if you weren't religious, maybe you didn't belong. That's a dangerous path—one that pushes people out instead of bringing them together.

---

### 4. Religious Fascism in Other Countries

The United States wasn't the only country where religion was used to gain power. In other parts of the world, religious fascism was even more extreme.

#### **Spain – Francisco Franco**

After the Spanish Civil War ended in 1939, General Francisco Franco became Spain's dictator. His government was closely tied to the Catholic Church. Together, they promoted a strict, nationalist version of

Catholicism that controlled schools, laws, and daily life. Speaking against the Church or the government could get you arrested—or worse. Obeying Franco was often presented as obeying God.

### **Argentina – Juan Perón**

Juan Perón, who led Argentina in the 1940s and 1950s, used a mix of religion, military strength, and populist messages to stay in power. At first, he worked with Catholic leaders, promoting family values and religious education. But when Church officials began criticizing him, he turned on them. Still, he kept using religion to make his rule seem moral and just.

In both countries, religion wasn't just a belief system. It was used to control speech, behavior, and thought.

---

## **5. Controlling Thought, Culture, and Speech**

One of the key goals of religious fascism is controlling how people think. This means shaping education, art, media, and even private beliefs to fit a narrow idea of what's "right."

In the U.S., this showed up in many ways:

- Schools were pressured to teach "patriotic" and religious-friendly lessons.
- Books that challenged tradition or promoted new ideas—especially about race, gender, or science—were banned or attacked.
- People who supported civil rights or criticized religion in politics were often smeared as communists or enemies of America.

Popular culture was also shaped by this thinking. TV shows, magazines, and newspapers focused on "family values" and the image of a perfect, church-going American family. Problems like racism, poverty, and inequality were often ignored—or worse, blamed on people who didn't "follow God."

Many politicians and preachers warned that if America didn't return to Christian values, God would punish the nation. This fear kept people in line and made it risky to speak out.

---

## **6. People Who Spoke Out**

Thankfully, not everyone stayed silent.

**Reinhold Niebuhr**, a well-known Christian thinker, warned against using religion for political power. He said no country—including the U.S.—should ever assume it was chosen by God. That kind of thinking leads to pride, war, and oppression.

**Martin Luther King Jr.** began his civil rights work in the late 1950s. He used Christian values not to dominate others, but to call for justice, equality, and love. His leadership showed that faith can be used to liberate—not control.

Many others pushed back, too. Teachers refused to change their lessons. Students protested the addition of “under God” in schools. Writers challenged censorship. Some lost jobs or faced threats—but they helped slow the spread of religious fascism.

---

## 7. How This Looks Like Today

You might be thinking, “That was the 1950s. Things are different now.” But look around—some things haven’t changed, and others are coming back.

Today, some leaders talk about America as a Christian nation again. They pass laws based on religious beliefs and push for schools to teach “Christian values.” They ban books, silence certain voices, and claim to speak for God.

January 6, 2021, was a shocking example. When rioters stormed the U.S. Capitol, some carried crosses, prayed publicly, and waved Christian flags. One sign read: “Jesus is my Savior, Trump is my President.” That’s not just politics. That’s religious fascism—faith used to justify violence and power.

This isn’t about having faith or going to church. Many religious people oppose this movement. The problem is when religion becomes a weapon used by the state, especially to harm others or take away rights.

---

## Conclusion: The Cost of Silence

Between 1946 and 1960, the world saw how easily faith can be twisted into something dangerous. Religious fascism dressed itself up as morality and patriotism—but underneath, it brought fear, silence, and division.

We must learn from that time. We must understand that no matter how good it sounds, using religion to control others is never right. True faith should inspire love, not fear. It should free people, not trap them.

The question now is: Will we speak up when it happens again? Will we defend the rights of all people—religious or not—to live freely?

History doesn’t have to repeat itself. But if we stay silent, it will.

Let’s learn from the past so we can protect our future.