

Under God, Under Control: The Rise of Religious Fascism in Postwar America 1941–1946

I. Introduction

Between 1941 and 1946, the world was in chaos. World War II was raging across Europe, Africa, and Asia. Millions of people were dying. Countries were bombing each other, leaders were giving fiery speeches, and armies were marching across borders. But while most people focus on the military and political battles, something else was happening in the background—something powerful and dangerous. Religion was being used as a weapon.

In some countries, leaders used religion to support fascism—a form of government where a dictator has total control, and people are not allowed to speak freely or disagree. Fascism often comes with strong nationalism (believing your country is better than all others), a hatred of outsiders, and a desire to return to “traditional values.” Religion, which is supposed to bring peace and love, was twisted to support violence and fear.

During this time, churches and religious leaders made hard choices. Some supported the fascist governments, hoping to keep their power or avoid punishment. Others tried to resist, often at great risk. And some stayed silent—choosing not to speak out against evil.

This article will walk you through how religion and fascism were mixed together from 1941 to 1946, during some of the darkest years in history. We'll look at what happened in Germany, Italy, Japan, and other parts of the world. We'll also talk about what happened after the war, when people had to face the truth about what they had done—or failed to do.

And maybe most importantly, we'll look at what's happening today. Because believe it or not, some of the same tricks used back then are being used again. Political leaders today still use religion to gain power, divide people, and push their agendas. That's why this history matters. If we understand the past, we're better prepared to stop it from happening again.

Let's start by looking at how religious fascism worked during the war itself.

II. Religious Fascism During World War II (1941–1945)

A. Axis Powers and Religious Messaging

Nazi Germany: “Positive Christianity” and Control

Adolf Hitler led Nazi Germany, and he had a plan to use religion to his advantage. He didn't really care about faith or God. He cared about power. Early on, Hitler promoted something called “Positive Christianity.” It sounded nice, but it was really just a fake version of Christianity that supported Nazi ideas.

“Positive Christianity” got rid of anything that made Jesus seem Jewish, even though Jesus was Jewish. The Nazis wanted a version of Christianity that matched their racist beliefs. Churches were told to support the government, not the Bible. Crosses were replaced with swastikas. Hitler was seen as almost a messiah figure—a savior of Germany.

Some pastors supported this, either out of belief or fear. Others, like members of the Confessing Church (a group of German Protestants who resisted), tried to fight back. One famous resistor was Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He spoke out against Hitler and helped Jews escape. He was eventually arrested and executed in 1945.

Italy Under Mussolini and the Vatican's Bargain

In Italy, Benito Mussolini had been in power since the 1920s. He made a deal with the Catholic Church in 1929 called the Lateran Treaty. This gave the Church its own country (Vatican City) and made Catholicism the official religion of Italy. In return, the Church supported Mussolini's rule—for a while.

As the war continued and Mussolini became more brutal, especially after joining forces with Hitler, some Catholics started to regret the deal. But by then, it was too late. The Church had already been part of a system that supported fascism.

Imperial Japan and Shinto Worship

In Japan, things were different but just as dangerous. The emperor of Japan, Hirohito, was seen not just as a leader but as a god. The government promoted State Shinto—a version of traditional Japanese religion that focused on worshiping the emperor and honoring the nation.

People were taught that dying for Japan was a holy act. Soldiers believed that fighting for the emperor was like serving God. Kamikaze pilots—who flew suicide missions—were seen as religious heroes. Anyone who disagreed or followed another religion could be punished.

B. Religious Institutions' Roles: Support, Silence, and Resistance

The Catholic Church and Pope Pius XII

The Catholic Church, led by Pope Pius XII, faced a difficult situation during the war. The Pope wanted to protect Catholics in Nazi-controlled areas, so he tried to stay neutral. But by staying quiet, he failed to speak out against the Holocaust in a strong way.

Critics say that the Church should have done more to protect Jews and other victims. Supporters say that the Pope was working behind the scenes, helping to hide Jews in churches and monasteries. Either way, the Church's silence is still debated today.

German Protestants: Divided Between Loyalty and Truth

In Germany, Protestant churches were split. Some churches formed the German Christian movement and supported Hitler. They removed Jewish teachings from their sermons and taught that Jesus was an Aryan (white, non-Jewish).

Other Protestants refused to follow. The Confessing Church, led by people like Bonhoeffer and Martin Niemöller, believed that true Christianity could not support Nazism. Many of them were arrested, and some were killed.

The Russian Orthodox Church and Stalin's Deal

Under Soviet rule, religion had been banned. But when Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, Joseph Stalin changed his mind. He reopened churches and allowed religious leaders to preach again—to boost morale and national pride.

The Russian Orthodox Church became a tool for Soviet propaganda. Priests encouraged people to fight the Nazis. After the war, the Church stayed under tight government control but was allowed to exist because it served Stalin's goals.

C. Anti-Semitism and Genocide: Religion Twisted Into Hate

The Holocaust—the mass murder of six million Jews—was fueled by racist ideas, but it was also connected to centuries of religious hatred. For hundreds of years, Jews had been blamed for things like killing Jesus or being “outsiders.” This prejudice made it easier for the Nazis to spread lies and turn people against their Jewish neighbors.

Some religious leaders helped Jews hide or escape. But others helped the Nazis or said nothing at all. In countries like Hungary, Poland, and Croatia, local churches often looked the other way—or even encouraged violence against Jews.

The Nazis didn't just target Jews. They also went after Romani people, gay people, disabled people, Jehovah's Witnesses, and others. Many of these groups were religious minorities. The Nazis saw anyone who didn't fit their idea of a “perfect Aryan” as dangerous.

This shows how religion, when twisted by hate and fear, can become a tool for genocide.

III. The Collapse of Fascist Regimes (1943–1945)

A. Italy Falls First

By 1943, things were going badly for Italy. The Allies (America, Britain, and their partners) were pushing back against the Axis powers. Italy's military was losing battles, its cities were being bombed, and its people were tired of war and fascism.

Benito Mussolini, the fascist leader of Italy, was arrested in July 1943 by his own people. Italy then made peace with the Allies. But Mussolini wasn't finished yet. Hitler helped him escape and set him up as the leader of a puppet government in Northern Italy, called the Italian Social Republic. This part of Italy stayed under Nazi control until 1945.

During this time, the Catholic Church in Italy tried to distance itself from Mussolini. The Church had supported him for years, but now that he was losing power, Church leaders began to speak more carefully. Some even started helping people escape Nazi capture.

Still, many Italians asked: "Where was the Church when we needed it most?" The answer was complicated. Like in Germany, some priests helped secretly, while others stayed quiet. The Church had played both sides for too long.

In April 1945, Mussolini was captured by Italian resistance fighters and executed. His body was hung upside down in a public square. His fall marked the collapse of fascist Italy.

B. Germany's Downfall

In Germany, the situation was even more intense. By early 1945, Allied forces were moving into Germany from all sides. Cities were being destroyed by bombings. The German army was collapsing. Hitler refused to surrender and stayed hidden in a bunker in Berlin.

Religious leaders in Germany were split. Some had supported Hitler all the way through. Others were starting to realize the horror of what had happened. But by now, it was too late to stop the damage.

In April 1945, as Soviet troops entered Berlin, Hitler took his own life. A week later, Germany surrendered. The war in Europe was over.

The Nazi regime had fallen—but the truth was just beginning to come out. As Allied soldiers liberated concentration camps, they were shocked by what they saw: piles of bodies, starving survivors, ovens used to burn human remains. The world began to learn about the full horror of the Holocaust.

Many Germans claimed they didn't know what was happening. Others said they were just following orders. Some religious leaders began to apologize for not speaking out sooner. Others stayed silent, hoping to move on.

C. Japan and the End of Emperor Worship

Japan was the last Axis power to fall. Unlike Germany and Italy, Japan had not been invaded. Its leaders believed surrender would bring shame. But by 1945, American forces had taken control of key islands near Japan and were bombing its cities. Then, in August 1945, the U.S. dropped two atomic bombs—one on Hiroshima, and one on Nagasaki.

These bombings killed over 100,000 people and forced Japan to surrender.

This surrender created a huge change in Japan's religious life. For years, the Japanese people had been taught that the emperor was a living god. Obeying him was a religious duty. But after the war, Japan was forced to give up this belief. In 1946, Emperor Hirohito went on the radio and told the nation that he was not divine. It shocked people across the country.

The U.S. helped Japan write a new constitution. It included freedom of religion and a separation of religion from government. State Shinto was banned. Religious freedom replaced emperor worship. Just like in Italy and Germany, religion had to change after fascism fell.

IV. Postwar Reckoning and Reconstruction (1945–1946)

A. Nuremberg Trials and Moral Questions

After the war ended, the world had to deal with the destruction—and with justice. In 1945 and 1946, the Allied powers put top Nazi leaders on trial in Nuremberg, Germany. These trials were not just about war crimes like invading countries or bombing civilians. They were also about crimes against humanity—like the Holocaust, slave labor, and torture.

For the first time in history, people were being held legally responsible for mass murder and genocide.

Some of the men on trial said they were just following orders. Others tried to blame Hitler. A few showed no regret at all. But the world wanted answers.

Religion came up more than once during the trials. People asked: Where were the churches during all of this? Why didn't more religious leaders stand up for the victims?

A few brave voices, like Pastor Martin Niemöller (who had been imprisoned for resisting the Nazis), spoke out. He famously said:

“First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Socialist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.”

This quote reminded people that silence in the face of evil is dangerous. Religion, many said, should never be used to justify hatred or stay quiet during injustice.

B. Religious Institutions Rebranding Themselves

After the war, churches and religious groups scrambled to rebuild their image. In countries like Germany and Italy, people began asking hard questions about the role of religion under fascism. Some churches admitted they made mistakes. Others tried to act like nothing had happened.

In Germany, Protestant and Catholic churches faced criticism for helping or staying silent during the Nazi years. To recover, they started new efforts to teach love, peace, and forgiveness. Some issued public apologies.

The Catholic Church, led by Pope Pius XII, didn't directly apologize for staying quiet during the Holocaust. But later leaders of the Church would try to address this history. Pope John Paul II, for example, would speak openly about the Church's failures during World War II many decades later.

In Italy, the Catholic Church began to support "Christian democracy"—a political idea that mixed religious values with democratic government. These new political parties rejected fascism and supported human rights, freedom of religion, and social justice.

This marked a major shift. Religion was now being used to promote democracy instead of dictatorship.

C. The Start of the Cold War and New Religious Alignments

Right after World War II, a new global struggle began: the Cold War. This was not a shooting war (at least not at first), but a war of ideas between the United States and the Soviet Union.

The U.S. said it stood for freedom, democracy, and Christianity. The Soviet Union said it stood for communism, equality, and atheism.

Because the Soviet Union was officially atheist (against religion), American leaders used religion as a political tool. "In God We Trust" was added to the money. "Under God" was added to the Pledge of Allegiance in the 1950s. Churches were encouraged to preach against communism.

Once again, religion was being used in politics—this time not by fascists, but by anti-communists.

In Europe, churches were divided. Some supported the U.S. and capitalism. Others leaned toward socialism or tried to stay neutral. In Soviet countries, religion was mostly banned or pushed underground, but it survived in secret.

So even after fascism fell, religion was still being pulled into global power struggles. Faith had not escaped politics—it had just moved to a new battlefield.

V. How 1941–1946 Mirrors Today

You might be thinking, “Okay, that’s all terrible, but that was a long time ago. What does this have to do with right now?”

The truth is: a lot.

The same ideas that powered religious fascism back then—blind loyalty, hate wrapped in holy language, and using faith to gain control—are still around today. They’ve just changed clothes. Let’s look at how.

A. Nationalism + Religion = Dangerous Mix

In fascist Germany, Italy, and Japan, religion was used to push the idea that one group of people was superior. In Germany, it was the idea of Aryan purity. In Japan, it was the worship of the emperor. In Italy, it was the myth of restoring Roman greatness.

Today, in many places—including the U.S., Russia, India, and even parts of Europe—we’re seeing religion being used again to fuel nationalism.

In the United States, some political leaders talk about “Christian nationalism.” They say America was founded as a Christian country and should stay that way. They want Christian values to shape laws, schools, and even the military.

That might sound fine to some people at first. But here’s the problem: when the government starts picking one religion over others, it often leads to discrimination, violence, and loss of freedom—especially for people who believe differently.

That’s exactly what happened in Nazi Germany. It didn’t start with death camps. It started with speeches, slogans, and laws. It started with “us vs. them.”

B. Religious Leaders Choosing Power Over Principle

In the 1940s, many churches went along with fascist regimes to protect themselves. Some thought they were doing the right thing. Others just didn’t want to lose their buildings or face jail.

Today, we still see some religious leaders cozying up to power. In exchange for influence, they support politicians who promise to defend “traditional values” or give them a seat at the table.

In Russia, the Orthodox Church supports President Vladimir Putin, even as he leads an invasion of Ukraine. Church leaders bless weapons and soldiers, just like in the old days. In India, Hindu nationalism is used to push out Muslims and other minorities. And in the U.S., some preachers turn their pulpits into political platforms, often picking one political party and ignoring everything else.

History shows us that when religion climbs into bed with politics, it usually ends badly. Faith becomes less about love and more about loyalty—to the wrong things.

C. Targeting Minorities with “Holy” Justification

In World War II, religious fascism targeted Jews, Roma, disabled people, and others as “outsiders.” Some religious texts were twisted to support these views. People were taught that their hate was holy.

Today, the same tactics are being used again.

Some politicians and media figures use fear of immigrants, Muslims, or LGBTQ+ people to rally support. They talk about “protecting the family,” “keeping the nation pure,” or “defending our way of life.”

They wrap their speeches in Bible verses or religious symbols. They make it sound like God is on their side.

But real faith—no matter what religion—doesn’t need enemies to prove its worth. It doesn’t need scapegoats. When religion is used to punch down on the weak, it stops being holy and starts being dangerous.

D. Silence Still Speaks Volumes

One of the biggest lessons from 1941–1946 is that silence can be deadly. When churches and religious leaders stayed quiet about fascism and genocide, their silence helped evil grow.

Today, silence is still a problem. When people see racism, cruelty, or corruption but say nothing, they are making a choice. When religious leaders ignore hate or look the other way, they become part of the problem.

It's not enough to quietly disagree with injustice. The lesson from the past is that people of faith must speak out—even when it's hard, even when it costs something.

E. What's Different—and What's Not

Let's be clear: we're not living in the 1940s. There are big differences.

- We have more freedom of religion in many places.
- The internet gives people a voice, even without a pulpit.
- History books, documentaries, and survivors have helped educate the world.

But there are still warning signs.

- Rising political violence.
- People calling for religious law to replace democratic law.
- Leaders using faith as a tool to divide and conquer.

These are red flags. They're not as loud as bombs or as obvious as swastikas. But they're real. And if we don't pay attention, we might find ourselves repeating the past.

VI. Final Thoughts and Lessons

From 1941 to 1946, the world saw some of the worst behavior in human history. Wars, concentration camps, bombings, and genocide left entire countries broken. And through it all, religion—something that's supposed to bring people together—was used to tear people apart.

But that's not where the story has to end. History doesn't just teach us what went wrong. It also gives us clues about how to do better.

A. When Faith Is Real, It Resists Evil

During World War II, some religious people did the right thing. They hid Jews, resisted fascism, and spoke out against hate. People like Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Germany, André Trocmé in France, and many ordinary citizens choose truth over safety.

They remind us that real faith—whether Christian, Jewish, Muslim, or anything else—is not about obeying corrupt leaders. It's about doing what's right, even when it's hard.

True religion doesn't serve the powerful. It protects the powerless.

B. Don't Wait Until It's Too Late

In country after country, people waited too long to act. Some didn't believe things could get worse. Others were scared. By the time they realized what was happening, fascism had taken control.

One of the most important lessons is this: if we want to stop evil, we have to speak up early. Not when the tanks are rolling through the streets—but when the warning signs are flashing.

Those warning signs include:

- Politicians who say only they can save the nation.
- Laws that favor one religion over others.
- Blaming outsiders or minorities for society's problems.
- Churches that serve the government instead of the people.

If we see these signs, we shouldn't stay quiet.

C. Ask Questions. Stay Awake. Be Brave.

One reason religious fascism spread in the 1940s is because people stopped asking questions. They accepted what they were told. They believed the slogans. They trusted the leaders more than their own values.

That's why it's so important to stay curious. Ask:

- "Why is this law being passed?"
- "Is this really what my faith teaches?"
- "Who benefits from this policy?"
- "Who's being left out?"

Being a good person isn't about being perfect. It's about staying awake, paying attention, and doing the next right thing—even if it's small.

D. Choose Love Over Fear

Religious fascism always feeds on fear. Fear of change. Fear of “others.” Fear of losing power.

But history shows that love is stronger. People who acted with love—who protected strangers, who resisted hate, who spoke up for the voiceless—made a difference. They saved lives. They kept the light on during dark times.

And you can too.

Whether you belong to a religion or not, you have power. You can choose to build bridges instead of walls. You can speak the truth in a world full of lies. You can show kindness in places filled with cruelty.

In the End...

What happened from 1941 to 1946 wasn't just about tanks and treaties. It was about choices. Millions of people had to choose between fear and courage, silence and truth, hate and love.

Some chose badly. Others became heroes.

Today, we face our own set of challenges. No one is asking you to fight in a war or hide refugees in your basement. But the choices are still real.

Will we fall for the same lies? Or will we learn from the past?

Will we use religion to control—or to care?

The answer is up to us.

Let's not wait until the history books are writing about us. Let's make the right choices now.