

Christofascism

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When fascism comes to the United States, it will be wrapped in a flag and carrying a cross. —Sinclair Lewis

Ancient Witness: Revelation 13:1-4

About 16 years ago, I preached a sermon with the title, “American Fascism: Can It Happen Here?” It’s a play on Sinclair Lewis’ famous book on fascism, “It Can’t Happen Here.” And I remember how my congregation in Cincinnati reacted. They were kind, and they heard me out, but I don’t think many agreed with what I was saying at the time.

But times have changed!

And for the past 7 years, I’ve been reading article after article, many in quite mainstream outlets, that have used this word, fascism, without flinching.

In 1944, the New York Times asked then Vice President Henry Wallace to write a piece answering the following questions: What is a fascist? How many fascists have we? How dangerous are they? He wrote:

The American fascists are most easily recognized by their deliberate perversion of truth and fact. Their newspapers and propaganda carefully cultivate every fissure of disunity... They claim to be super-patriots, but they would destroy every liberty guaranteed by the Constitution. They demand free enterprise, but are the spokesmen for monopoly and vested interest. Their final objective toward which all their deceit is directed is to capture political power so that, using the power of the state and the power of the market simultaneously, they may keep the common man in eternal subjection.

As Wallace astutely said,

The American fascist would prefer not to use violence. His method is to poison the channels of public information.

And we’ve seen traditional news bullied and labeled as “fake,” and an explosion of fringe sources taken as “real.” Now, Wallace was using the classic definition of the word, “fascist,” the definition that Mussolini had when he claimed to have invented the word: “Fascism should more appropriately be called corporatism because it is a merger of state and corporate power.” The American Heritage Dictionary defined fascism as “a system of government that exercises a dictatorship of the extreme right, typically through the *merging of state and business leadership*, together with belligerent nationalism.” In 1938, when Mussolini dissolved Parliament, he replaced it with the “Chamber of the Fascist Corporations.”

Today, we have seen the ascendancy of corporate power and its merger with the state. The Supreme Court's "Citizens United" decision gave corporations birth and status of human beings, with first amendment rights to dominate political discourse. Wallace expands on fascism as corporatism:

Still another danger is represented by those who, paying lip service to democracy and the common welfare, in their insatiable greed for money and power which money gives, do not hesitate surreptitiously to evade the laws designed to safeguard the public from monopolistic extortion.

So the rich get richer and more powerful on the backs of the poor and middle class. Giant corporations wipe out small and medium sized businesses, and a corporate iron fist grabs control of our government itself. As Wallace wrote, some in big business "are willing to jeopardize the structure of American liberty to gain some temporary advantage."

And as Hitler did with trade union leaders and the Jews, the fascists point to a "them," the "Other," to distract people from the real cause of economic harm inflicted by corporate power. Wallace continued,

...always and everywhere they can be identified by their appeal to prejudice and by the desire to play upon the fears and vanities of different groups in order to gain power. It is no coincidence that the growth of modern tyrants has in every case been heralded by the growth of prejudice. It may be shocking to some people in this country to realize that, without meaning to do so, they hold views in common with Hitler when they preach discrimination...

And today we hear scapegoating and demonization of "them" and the "Other." We hear toward the Mexicans: "Build a wall!" And toward Muslims: "Keep them out! Make them register!" White Supremacists become top presidential advisors. And a new Nationalism—the unquestioning, uncritical zeal—"Make America Great Again," where people's patriotism is questioned. People who stand up for Black Lives or who are Anti-Fascist are viewed as the enemy. Anti-trans and anti-gay laws are passed. Books are banned. People who work for fairness and justice are labeled derisively as "woke."

With the emerging corporatism in this nation and the control by the wealthy few, we witness the erosion of the middle class, declining wages, loss of benefits and the proliferation of low paying jobs. The American people are losing ground, and the scapegoating of immigrants distracts the masses from what is really going on.

Robert Paxton, in his book, *The Anatomy of Fascism*, defines it as

political behavior marked by obsessive preoccupation with community decline, humiliation or victimhood... in which a mass-based party of committed nationalist militants, working in uneasy but effective collaboration with traditional elites, abandons

democratic liberties and pursues with redemptive violence and without ethical or legal restraints goals of internal cleansing and external expansion.

And so, fascism is also an authoritarianism. It brings a weakening of democratic institutions, a loss of checks and balances, conflicts of interest, above the law, lack of accountability, and bullying, threatening and intimidating those who are critical.

We see rampant corruption and undermining fair elections: gerrymandering, crosschecking and purging voter rolls, a variety of voter suppression strategies, and blatant attempts to overturn valid elections supported by The Big Lie.

What is fascism? First, it is *authoritarian*. Anti-democratic, anti-egalitarian. A divided, us vs. them society. It is a form of minority rule where the branches of government are taken over to serve the minority, not the majority. The Nazis never polled over 37% in Germany. Second, it is *tribal*. Based on the supremacy, the purity of a tribe (Christian and White). It is theocratic; it is God's chosen tribe. The tribe is marked by a nationalism, false-patriotism and militarism. And there is corruption, making those in the tribe above the law. Third, it is a highly *unequal society*, an oligarchy or plutocracy, where there is a concentration of wealth and power into an elite. A crony capitalism. Fourth, *there is an alliance* between this oligarchy and a militant, angry segment of the tribe that is struggling and losing ground and that is manipulated by deceit and hatred to see those outside the tribe as their problem and not the ruling elite who are stealing them blind. And finally, fascism is a system that needs hatred. *Hatred is the oxygen*. It depends on scapegoats and enemies, racism, victimizing, sexism and xenophobia. It is anti-immigrant, anti-LGBTQ persons and anti-union.

As people of faith, this is of utmost importance, because what happened in Germany *can* happen here. The rise of fascism happened in a democratic Weimar Republic, and we are not inherently morally superior to the German people. We are not exceptional. And that time, the Christian church mostly was absorbed and went along with the fascist government, not unlike American Christianity today. Only a small minority, calling themselves the "confessing church," found the backbone to resist, at great peril to themselves. And we find ourselves still on a precipice, still not out of the woods by any means.

It can happen here, but not without the support of an impostor Christianity that provides the hatred, the oxygen for the unholy alliance called fascism. It was the theologian, Dorothee Sölle who coined the term, Christofascism, to name this form of Christianity that aligns with domination of others. This impostor Christianity is not only anti-democratic, it contradicts the life and teaching of Jesus. It is about power and dominance and not love and justice. As Kristen Du Mez, a historian at Calvin University said, "They want the warrior Christ who wields a bloody sword and defeats his enemies." As followers of Jesus we need to challenge the theological justification being done in his name. As Sinclair Lewis famously said, "When fascism comes to the United States, it will be wrapped in a flag and carrying a cross." We must say very clearly that the gospel is anti-fascist. We must challenge this distortion of our faith that foments hatred and provides oxygen for fascism.

Thomas Merton once wrote,

Strong hate, the hate that takes joy in hating, is strong because it does not believe itself to be unworthy and alone. It feels the support of a justifying God, of an idol of war, an avenging and destroying spirit. From such blood-drinking gods the human race was once liberated... But [people] are consequently returning to the old war gods, the gods that insatiably drink blood and eat the flesh of [humanity]. It is easier to serve the hate-gods because they thrive on the worship of collective fanaticism. To serve the hate-gods, one has only to be blinded by collective passion. To serve the God of Love once must be free, one must face the terrible responsibility of the decision to love...

Friends, we need to challenge this counterfeit Christianity, challenge the hate-gods with the God of love and justice.

And it is often forgotten that the Christian tradition was, itself, born out of a resistance to the Empire and authoritarianism. It was hunted down and persecuted by the nation-state which has run amuck, that they described as the “Beast,” that did not serve the love and justice of God, but instead devoured and oppressed the people. And in fact, the first generations of the followers of Jesus were pacifists—conscious objectors! We forget that.

And the Book of Revelation, by the way, was not a shallow prediction of future events, as is commonly misunderstood. Rather it spoke of the then-present conditions of the brutal, totalitarian rule of Nero, in code, to avoid retribution. It is a book about the courageous resistance of people of faith in a violent, repressive empire!

And so, how will history view us?

After the constitutional convention of 1787, a woman asked Franklin what kind of government had been adopted, to whom he famously replied, “A republic if you can keep it.”

Keeping a republic is no easy, automatic thing. May we heed the lessons of the past and the words of those, such as Edmund Burke, in the 18th century, who said,

All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is for good people to do nothing.

Amen.