



What is the appeal of fascism?

Clay Nelson © 1 March 2020

I'm not sure what inspired me to focus on today's topic. It may have been spending too much time in the dystopian world of Gilead watching *The Handmaid's Tale* or reading the news from my birth country just to cheer me up. Or it could be that fascism by any other name is finding new life around the world. We should not be oblivious.

When I was growing up there were four larger-than-life villains in the immediate post-World War II era: Adolph Hitler, Benito Mussolini, Francisco Franco and Joseph Stalin. The first three self-identified as fascists and a number of scholars argue Stalin had more in common with them than with Karl Marx.

As the atrocities of WWII became widely known through the Nuremburg Trials, it was not uncommon for Americans to wonder how anyone could have been swept up into fascism. Not aware of their own history in regard to fascism, their self-righteous condemnation of the moral failure of the German and Italian people was prevalent. It certainly couldn't happen here in America they thought.

Apparently a "one definition fits all" understanding of fascism does not exist in academia. So, I found it more useful to look at characteristics common to fascist regimes. Political scientist Dr Lawrence Britt identifies fourteen of them in his essay entitled "Fascism Anyone?"

1. Fascist regimes make constant use of patriotic mottos, slogans, symbols, songs, and other paraphernalia. Flags are seen everywhere, as are flag symbols on clothing and in public displays.

2. Because of fear of enemies and the need for security, the people in fascist regimes are persuaded that human rights can be ignored in certain cases because of "need."

3. The people are rallied into a unifying patriotic frenzy over the need to eliminate a perceived common threat or foe: racial, ethnic or religious minorities; migrants; liberals; communists; socialists; terrorists, and probably more than a few Unitarians.

4. Even when there are widespread domestic problems, the military is given a disproportionate amount of government funding, and the domestic agenda is neglected. Soldiers and military service are glamorised.

5. The governments of fascist nations tend to be almost exclusively male-dominated. Under fascist regimes, traditional gender roles are made more rigid. Opposition to abortion is high, as is homophobia and anti-gay legislation and national policy.

6. Sometimes the media are directly controlled by the government, but in other cases, the media are indirectly controlled by government regulation, or sympathetic media spokespeople and executives. Censorship, especially in wartime, is very common.

7. Fear is used as a motivational tool by the government over the masses.
8. Governments in fascist nations tend to use the most common religion in the nation as a tool to manipulate public opinion. Religious rhetoric and terminology is common from government leaders, even when the major tenets of the religion are diametrically opposed to the government's policies or actions. We will explore this characteristic more closely in few minutes.
9. The industrial and business aristocracy of a fascist nation often are the ones who put the government leaders into power, creating a mutually beneficial business/government relationship and power elite.
10. Because the organising power of labour is the only real threat to a fascist government, labour unions are either eliminated entirely, or are severely suppressed.
11. Fascist nations tend to promote and tolerate open hostility to higher education, and academia. It is not uncommon for professors and other academics to be censored or even arrested. Free expression in the arts is openly attacked, and governments often refuse to fund the arts.
12. Under fascist regimes, the police are given almost limitless power to enforce laws. The people are often willing to overlook police abuses and even forego civil liberties in the name of patriotism. There is often a national police force with virtually unlimited power in fascist nations.
13. Fascist regimes almost always are governed by groups of friends and associates who appoint each other to government positions and use governmental power and authority to protect their friends from accountability. It is not uncommon in fascist regimes for national resources and even treasures to be appropriated or even outright stolen by government leaders.
14. Sometimes elections in fascist nations are a complete sham. Other times elections are manipulated by smear campaigns against or even assassination of opposition candidates, use of legislation to control voting numbers or political district boundaries, and manipulation of the media. Fascist nations also typically use their judiciaries to manipulate or control elections.

“Make America great again” (MAGA) hats, Muslim bans, undermining LGBTQ rights, the Wall, children in cages, the Space Force, ICE, draconian laws restricting abortion, union busting, encouraging foreign countries to interfere in elections, removing democrats from electoral rolls, assassinations of foreign leaders, mainstreaming racism and misogyny as acceptable, turning a blind eye to or even advocating violence, fake news, denying scientific evidence, enemy lists, gross corruption for personal financial gain, tax breaks for corporations at the expense of the poor, breaking laws with no accountability, and the Christian far right proclaiming Trump as the Second Coming of Christ. And that is just the beginning of the list of how the US has slid into fascism. It didn't just happen in the last three years. It has its roots in colonial times. But now, all fourteen characteristics are overwhelmingly in evidence. Many of us knew it would be a time of darkness under a Trump administration, but with the firewall of the Republican-controlled US Senate, one wonders if

even the balm of Gilead can heal the contagion of fascism now raging in the US. I am honestly terrified.

We can't sit back and assume this is America's problem. Fascism is a virus that is not easily quarantined. Historically, even New Zealand has had outbreaks, but fortunately to date it has never gained a strong foot-hold, although the fascist New Zealand Legion had a membership of 20,000 in the 1930s. The 1980s saw a number of fascist political groups formed, but none have flourished. Like the US we have an election this year. It will be interesting to observe if any of the fourteen characteristics rear their head. It will be important for us to pay attention.

This is particularly true for Unitarians. For religion and fascism have been natural allies and our Seven Principles makes us the antidote to this poison, but not if we don't speak up.

Davidson Loehr, who in 2005 was the minister of the UU Church of Austin, Texas, was interviewed in the in the *UU World* after delivering a widely read sermon on *Living under Fascism*. Dr Loehr, a Fellow in the Jesus Seminar, holds a doctoral degree in theology, philosophy of religion, and the philosophy of science from the University of Chicago.

He is clearly not a fan of organised religion and clerical hierarchies. When asked if religion was bad for democracy, this was his answer:

Literalistic religion is always bad for democracy and is, in fact, one of its mortal enemies.

There's a Buddhist metaphor that says all religions, gods, saviours, sages, and teachings are so many fingers pointing to the moon. The object, of course, is to see where they're pointing, not to worship the finger. While democracy demands civil behaviour and encourages all citizens to grow into their best selves, it also recognizes that there are many roads—many fingers—and makes sure you are free to find the path toward our common behavioural goals that fits you. That's part of the moral reasoning behind the separation of church and state.

But when you are stuck in that deadening literalism, you aren't looking for the light; you're worshipping the finger. Then other paths threaten the primacy of your own path and must not be allowed. So literal religions are natural allies of authoritarian and repressive governments, but are never happy residents in a democracy where people are free to shrug off literalist notions of salvation.

Later in the interview he is asked, "Under the existing orthodoxy, is God a fascist? Is any concept of God consistent with critical thought and humanism?" His answer is:

When God is a finger, he'll be looking for a trigger to pull. In the real world, God doesn't "exist" as a being, a critter with a neocortex, kneecaps, and eyeballs. The word "God" is a symbol that stands for those ideals and allegiances that we happen to think are most demanding of respect and obedience. Once again, we're looking for the "moon," for enlightenment, illumination. Looking for the moon empowers the seekers, but not the priests or the politicians.

In Christianity, this is the difference between the gospel of John in the New Testament and the Gospel of Thomas, which was excluded from the New Testament

precisely because it empowers everyone, rather than empowering only the leaders — whether priest, church, politician, or state.

God-talk isn't the description of a critter, it's an idiom of expression, used to address issues we believe very important. But since there is no fellow called God that exists except as an imaginative creation, that means that when preachers speak as though there is such a fellow, and claim to be speaking for this fellow, then they have turned the symbol "God" into a hand puppet to do their — but not your — bidding. Pretending to speak for this fellow empowers the churches and keeps the ministers in their jobs.

When asked if fascism is a kind of political fundamentalism. He explains,

I think it's useful to see fascism as political fundamentalism, and fundamentalism as religious fascism. They have nearly identical social and political agendas. They both want men on top in every way; women defined by their biology — and by men; literal rather than liberal understandings of religion; and obedience rather than empowerment. Both also operate on a foundation of fear rather than trust.

As I reflect on this existential threat, this clear and present danger, I have come to the conclusion that we can't just observe fascism's insidious inroads into our political and economic processes, we need to eliminate the conditions that demagogues use to build a constituency. You see, fascists have no compunction to tell the truth. They look at the injustices and hardships that grind us down and lie. They tell us who is to blame for our problems and then promise us to protect us from them and make all things right. This means we have to take seriously the conditions that make fascism attractive to those disadvantaged by the present system, be it high youth unemployment amongst those on the margins, debilitating student debt, stagnant wages, inability to find affordable and decent housing, ignoring the consequences of climate change, corrupt election financing, hamstringing labour unions, gender wage inequality, misusing social media to deceive and fuel hate are just some of the ways the soil is made fertile for fascism.

We must be a faith movement that talks about morality, responsibility and ethics and then walks our talk. Unitarians must be the finger that point to them, not religion. We must seek to serve the greater good of the greatest number leaving the world a little better than we found it.

This is not a once and for all task. The world must be civilised again and again with each new generation. That's reason enough for our existence.