

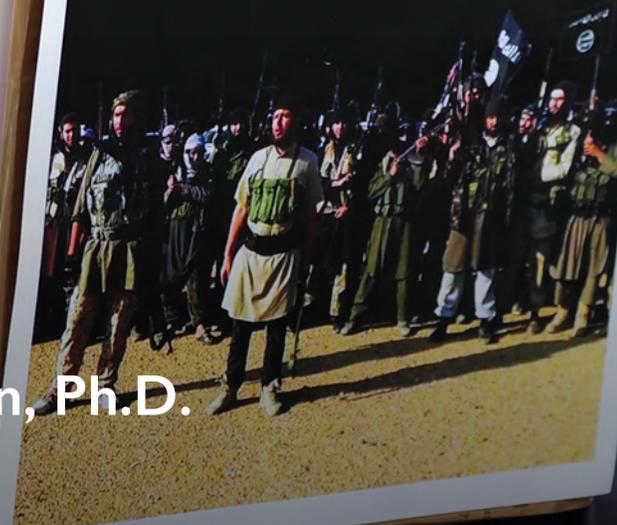


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Occasional Paper No. 1  
2016

Keith Augustus Burton, Ph.D.

# Honesty and Healing: Democratic Delusions and Imperial Agendas





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# **Honesty and Healing: Democratic Delusions and Imperial Agendas**

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## **Author Biography**

Keith Augustus Burton holds a Doctor of Philosophy in Religious and Theological Studies from Northwestern University. He directs the Center for Adventist-Muslim Relations at Oakwood University, and has authored several books. He is also a member of the Teaching Faculty at Claremont Lincoln University.

## **Summary**

Democracies often promote themselves as havens of free speech. However, there are times when free speech provides a shield for protected hate speech. Often shrouded in the guise of patriotism, this hate speech has the potential of inciting violence, which can serve as the catalyst for governments to behave in ways that further victimize the targets of the verbal vitriol. This ripple effect is currently being witnessed on a global platform as various entities in the west incite Islamic radicals to violence with “hate speech,” and receive protection from Western governments that use conflict as an excuse to expand their imperialistic agendas that negatively impact the Muslim world—the vast majority of whom desire peace.



## **Introduction**

The terrible attack on New York's World Trade Center ushered in an unprecedented era of global societal uncertainty. While some may view the unfolding drama through the hero-villain lenses, honest evaluators would have to admit that the protagonists and antagonists in this turbulent script are difficult to identify. Unfortunately, religion is at the very core of this violent conflict. However, the opponents are not so neatly identified and the plot is severely complicated.

Those unwilling to take an objective step back and assess the complex situation will easily see this as a Jew/Christian versus Muslim confrontation—one that pits the so called West against political Islam. Of course, this shallow perspective totally ignores the tens of thousands of Muslims killed by the so called ISIS, Al Qaeda, Boqer Haram, Al Shabaab and other terrorist groups. It's also in denial of the ethnically motivated warfare as Sunni, Shia, Kurd, Allawite and other sects fan the embers of centuries old grudges. Nonetheless, it is this narrow view that has dominated the conversation and widened the gulfs between warring parties.

This essay proposes that correctly applied religion can play a major role in not only confronting, but providing solutions for problems underlying the conflict. Religion is too often hijacked by politicians to serve their own ideological purposes. However, when in the possession of the truly "religious" who understand the intimate, personal and private nature of faith, it can be a force for good. As a way of laying the foundation for productive interfaith action, this essay will provide contemporary and historical insights into the interrelatedness between hate speech and ideological violence.

## Democratic Delusions

Former Republican presidential hopeful, Dr. Ben Carson, recently stated that he would not want to see a Muslim as President of the United States of America. As far as he was concerned, a Muslim president would not be able to separate his faith from his office and as such would introduce “sharia law” to the U.S. When asked to clarify his statements, Carson made it clear that he did not “misspeak,” but merely articulated what many others have been thinking.<sup>1</sup>

Those who follow American politics know that Carson’s rhetoric is closer to the “main stream” than some would like to admit.<sup>2</sup> As Donald Trump remarked in his offhanded reply to a reporter who questioned him about Carson’s statement, “some have said that [a Muslim President in the White House has] already happened.”<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, it was Hilary Clinton who tested the bait during the 2008 primaries when a member of her staff leaked a picture of Obama dressed in Sufi garb to the press and in an interview qualified her belief that he is *not* a Muslim with the words, “as far as I know.”<sup>4</sup> The obvious message was: “He’s one of *them*.” Although this political strategy backfired for the Clintons, the Birthers have continued to play the refrain as they hark on the theory that his very name has exposed him.

President Obama’s response has not really done much to alleviate social mistrust against Muslims. Instead of pointing to the establishment and prohibition clauses of the First Amendment of the constitution, his strategy—and that of his surrogates—has always been to stress his allegiance to Christianity. There has been no strong “so what

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Easley, “Carson doubles down on no Muslims in the White House,” *The Hill* (Sep 20, 2015), <http://thehill.com>.

<sup>2</sup> See collection of essays in Carl W. Ernst, ed. *Islamophobia in America: The Anatomy of Intolerance* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Nick Visser, “Trump Refuses to Accept that Obama Was born in the U.S., Is Not Muslim,” *The Huffington Post* (Sep 20, 2015), <http://www.huffingtonpost.com>.

<sup>4</sup> Bob Herbert, “Confronting the Kitchen Sink,” *New York Times* (March 8, 2008), <http://www.nytimes.com>.

if he was” retort to these xenophobic accusations. Most recently at the February 2015 National Prayer Breakfast while addressing the problem of the so called Islamic State, the President made his most strident defense of Islam when he reminded the audience that Christians had also engaged in horrific atrocities in the name of religion.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, although he exposed the self-righteous hypocrisy of an amnesiac nation, he still did not use the opportunity to address the attitude that excludes Muslims from the American “melting pot.”

The “othering”—some may say demonizing—of Islam has become so commonplace in much of the “Christian” West that there has been little outrage at the highly publicized instances of Muslim directed hate speech.<sup>6</sup> In fact, those who perpetuate the hate speech simply claim immunity under the broad democratic umbrella known as “free speech” and accuse the few voices that oppose them of being anti-democratic. Some of the “free speech” expressions in the past few years include the public burning of the Qur’an by Florida pastor, Terry Jones; the sordid movie about the Prophet Muhammad by Coptic Christian Nakoula Bassely Nakoula; and the denigrating anti-Islamic cartoons published in French periodical *Charlie Hebdo*.

Of the three instances, the one that drew the most public attention was the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons—not for their actual creation, but for the retaliation against some of the staff by two Muslim extremists who attacked the office, killing eleven people and wounding eleven more. It did not take long for *#jesuisCharlieHebdo* to be trending on the Twitter-sphere as millions endorsed the magazine’s right to be offensive. That the support was not simply about sympathizing with the victims is evident in the fact that *Charlie Hebdo*’s usual circulation of 60,000 was expanded to 7 million the following

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<sup>5</sup> Adam Gobink, “Obama and the Crusader,” *The New Yorker* (Feb 13, 2005), <http://www.newyorker.com>.

<sup>6</sup> Ernst, *Islamophobia* [Kindle] writes, “...for the many Americans who have no personal experience knowing Muslims as human beings, the overwhelmingly negative images of Islam circulated in the popular media amount to prejudice....”

month.<sup>7</sup> Most recently, Charlie Hebdo has exercised its “free speech” rights once again with satirical cartoons featuring the Syrian toddler Alan Kurdi who drowned and was washed up on a Turkish beach during his family’s attempt to escape the ISIS onslaught.<sup>8</sup>

The fact that Charlie Hebdo continues to ignore Muslim sensitivities begs the question, “When *does* free speech become hate speech?” This question is especially significant in our ever shrinking world where religious and cultural demographics are in a continuous state of flux. For the most part, the governments of “enlightened” Europe operate under Jean-Paul Sartre’s premise that “*Dieu n’existe pas.*” Consequently, the purpose of religion in a secular pluralistic<sup>9</sup> society is primarily psychological and serves as the anti-intellectual opiate that Karl Marx and Richard Dawkins derides.<sup>10</sup>

Since religion is often viewed in the West as a sub-set of myth whose writings should be housed alongside the poetic compositions of the Brothers’ Grimm, it is easy for Westerners to be insensitive to the sensitivities of those who see things differently. However, for many whose religion is an intricate part of their daily routine, the notion that the object and heroes of religious faith can be utilized for purposes of casual intercourse is offensive. For them, the issue is not about free speech and pluralistic maturity, but reverence and respect. In fact, in their view the very decision to make light of issues so sacred indicates an immature irreverence.<sup>11</sup>

It is no secret that perpetrators of hate speech do not act out of benign motives. Their sole purpose is to evoke negative emotions in their targets. Their task is

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<sup>7</sup> “Charlie Hebdo Printing 7 Million Copies of First Post-massacre Release,” *Haaretz* (Jan 18, 2015), <http://www.haaretz.com>.

<sup>8</sup> “Charlie Hebdo may face legal action over cartoons,” *Al Jazeera* (Sep 15, 2015), <http://www.aljazeera.com>.

<sup>9</sup> See Sosamma Samuel-Burnett, “Why pluralism can’t substitute for religious freedom,” Centennial Institute—Colorado Christian University (n.d., [ccu.edu](http://ccu.edu)), who draws a distinction between pluralism and religious freedom.

<sup>10</sup> See arguments in Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York, NY: Bantam Press, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Jack Jenkins, “After Texas Shooting, American Muslims Defend Anti-Islam Group’s Right to Free Speech,” (May 4, 2015), <http://www.thinkprogress.org>.

accomplished when they have been successful in agitating “believers.” The pious faithful living in societies where religiously offensive rhetoric is constitutionally protected often have no choice but to pretend that there is truth in the childhood playground ditty: “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me.” However, the real truth is less idealistic. Anti-religious rhetoric often strikes the intended recipients with the emotionally destructive force equal to other lethal weapons from the enemy’s diverse arsenal.

Whether we want to admit it or not, it is the constant barrage of anti-Muslim sentiment from various societal avenues that have helped to trigger the retaliatory hate switch in the hearts of the few westerners who have voluntarily embraced the so called Islamic State’s terroristic agenda.<sup>12</sup> They see themselves victimized by the same imperialist attitude that had colonized their places of ancestral origin. In their minds, the only freedom they are allotted, is the freedom to embrace Western norms—even those that may affront the very essence of their faith. Interpreting the accommodating patience of their local leaders as submissive weakness, they choose to yield their fragile, fractured faith to the manipulative wiles of intolerant extremists.

Those who align themselves with terrorist organizations often associate societal hate speech with the wider context of anti-Islamic violence. They know that the same governments that protect the hate speech of politicians like Ben Carson and religious leaders like Franklin Graham are also involved in overt acts of violence. For instance, while President Obama has drawn down the United States military presence in Afghanistan and Iraq, he has continued his indiscriminating drone warfare.<sup>13</sup> Further his encouragement and provision of military support for the toppling of Islamic regimes have further intensified the instability of a region already devastated by George W. Bush’s

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<sup>12</sup> See Simon Cottee, “Pilgrims to the Islamic State,” (July 24, 2015), <http://www.theatlantic.com>. Some western journalists tend to avoid the role of western culture. For instance, see Holly Yan, “How is ISIS luring Westerners,” (March 23, 2015), <http://www.cnn.com>; and Jason M. Breslow, “Why Are So Many Westerners joining ISIS?” (Aug 11, 2014), <http://www.pbs.org>.

<sup>13</sup> On the devastating effect of drone warfare on innocent people, see Medea Benjamin, *Drone Warfare: Killing by Remote Control* (New York, NY: Verso Books, 2013).

wars. In truth, the hate speech that permeates societal discourse is part and parcel of the ideological violence that is currently expressed via officially sanctioned government armies and ad-hoc guerilla militias, both of which aim to control through terror.

## **Imperial Agendas**

As previously stated, the global conflict that I am currently analyzing is not merely a battle of acrid words. It is a full scale war that has claimed the lives of tens of thousands of militants and hundreds of thousands of civilians. Entire nations have been decimated and millions have been displaced. For many in the West, this is something happening over “there” that we only experience in small sound bites while consuming our daily dose of media entertainment in the evenings. Consequently, it is not hard to see how many have simplified the conflict as a clash between the free “Christian” West with it’s love for freedom and the oppressive Muslim world with it’s desire to impose a restrictive Sharia on the world’s inhabitants.

These categories may appear to simplify the issue, but this type of simplification really amounts to gross obfuscation. The mere notion that the conflict has to do with religion demonstrates an unwillingness to face the facts. It is true that religious language has been thrown around a lot by parties on both sides, but those aware of the deeper issues know that religion is only being used as a smokescreen for a political agenda.<sup>14</sup> The real war is an ideological one that seeks to control the hearts and minds of Muslims in the Middle East and North Africa. Both the United States and the so called ISIS have political control as an ultimate objective.

The political aims of the so called ISIS are best understood by looking at the stated reasons for their existence. In it’s incipient phases, the group was known as *al*

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<sup>14</sup> Karen Armstrong, *Fields of Blood: Religion and the History of Violence* (New York, NY: Knopf, 2014), provides an interesting theory on the history of religious violence with her intriguing “three brain” evolutionary theory that cites politics and economics as the major culprits.

*Tawhid wal Jihad*. It was founded by Abu Musan al-Zarqawi, a Jordanian born Muslim who left a decadent life of alcohol and partying to go to Afghanistan where he would join Osama bin-Laden and the United States backed Mujahedeen towards the end of the Russian occupation. Zarqawi was not merely seeking youthful adventure among rabid mercenaries who view most breathing humans as the enemy. He was on a mission that he believed was divinely appointed. His mission was not to evoke terror for terror's sake, nor was it to bring down Western governments and forcefully convert all Europeans to Islam. Everything he did had one overarching purpose: to establish an empire sized state in formerly Muslim land that had been manipulated by European powers.

The so called Islamic State is very clear that one of their main objectives is to undo the work of the 1916 Sykes-Picot Agreement. Named after British and French diplomats, Sir Mark Sykes and François George-Picot, the Agreement (also known as the Asia Minor Agreement) parceled portions of the imperialistically dubbed "Middle East" to Britain, France and Russia. According to the Agreement, when the Triple Entente dealt their final blow against the Ottoman Empire, France was to control the south-east sections of Turkey, northern Iraq, Syria and Lebanon; England would have jurisdiction over southern Iraq, Jordan, and parts of Palestine; and Russia would get key areas in Turkey and Armenia.<sup>15</sup>

Early resistance to European hegemony in the region came in 1928 when Egyptian Hassan al-Banna formed the Muslim Brotherhood to socially mobilize Muslims against the British colonizers in Egypt, along with other European powers that had annexed formerly Muslim land. As far as al-Banna was concerned, Muslims across the globe were obligated to unite under the banner of their common faith and resist the influences of Western imperialism and its anti-Islamic agenda. Although religion was the uniting glue, what the Muslim Brotherhood really sought was political autonomy where Muslim values would be the basis of all laws and life.

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<sup>15</sup> For more on Sykes-Picot, see David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace: The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and the Creation of the Modern Middle East* (New York, NY: Holt Paperbacks, 2009).

Just four years after the establishment of the Muslim Brotherhood, Arab States began to seek independence from their European overlords. In 1932, Iraq was formally granted independence from Britain. Several years later, Britain would additionally agree to freedom for Egypt (1936) and Jordan (1946). During this period, the French would also offer autonomy to Syria (1936) and Lebanon (1943). However, while the language of “independence” may sound good, the British—especially—were masters at holding on to their colonies even after they supposedly let go. It would be two decades after the treaties that they would withdraw troops from Egypt and Syria, and even after the three-year long Palestinian Arab Revolt (1936-39) they refused to let go of that geographical part of their bounty until the creation of the State of Israel in 1948.

For many Arabs, the establishment of Israel served as a constant reminder that Western powers could do whatever they desired in “Muslim” territory. Although the Palestinians had been the scorn of many of their Muslim siblings in the faith, their plight became symbolic of the ongoing struggle between two worldviews—a struggle with roots that reach deeper than the Crusades. While the majority appear to have accepted the status quo and have learned to live with the power imbalance, an influential minority view acceptance as defeat and are determined to establish a type of Islamic caliphate that heretofore has only existed in the imaginations of an idyllic few.

This powerful minority views every act of Western interference into Muslim majority countries as an insult against Islam itself, and are especially incensed by Muslim governments that make too many concessions for Western secularism. Their anger reached a boiling point with the United States led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and the rest is history. In the name of religion, the so called Islamic State along with its counterparts in Boqer Haram, Al Shaabab and Al Qaeda, are willing to enact horrific acts of destruction in their quest to establish an anti-Western political state.

As far as the so called Islamic State is concerned, the US is the most formidable obstacle to the achievement of its goals. This is not to say that its leaders are not wary of other western governments, but it is the United States that acts with impunity and even thumbs its nose at the United Nations. Under the license of the “War on Terror,” hundreds and thousands of innocent Muslim civilians have lost their lives, and the massive embassy in Baghdad serves as a reminder to the region that America’s global tentacles are not restricted by borders.

An extreme version of the American agenda was embodied in the powerful organization that bore the name, Project for a New American Century. Formed in the 1990s, PNAC was most influential under the George W. Bush presidency. Their primary objective is perhaps summed up in the fourth fundamental proposition: “We need to accept responsibility for America’s unique role in preserving and extending an international order friendly to our security, our prosperity and our principles.” A significant number of PNAC charter members held important positions in Bush’s cabinet. These included Zalmay Khalilzad, Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney, Paul Wolfowitz and John Bolton. PNAC’s role in escalating and intensifying the current conflict is evidenced in the words of Reuel Marc Gerecht, PNAC fellow and former CIA officer, who said in 2001: “We have no choice but to re-instill in our foes and friends the fear and respect that attaches to any great power.... Only a war against Saddam Hussein will decisively restore the awe that protects American interests abroad and citizens at home.”<sup>16</sup>

Ironically, while the strategies of the so called Islamic State and the United States are different, their objectives are the same. They both want to exercise ideological and political influence over the people of the so-called “Middle East.” Their rationales may contradict each other, but they would both like to see a region that is friendly to their contrary political agendas. In their path to fulfillment, both have bloodied their hands in the name of “righteousness” and blinded their eyes to the reality that violence only

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<sup>16</sup> Taken from A. Flibbert, “Ideas and Entrepreneurs,” in Jane K. Cramer and A. Trevor Thrall, eds., *Why Did the United States Invade Iraq* (New York: Routledge, 2012).

begets more violence. The so called Islamic State may choose to broadcast their inexcusable horror by recording executions of journalists while the United States prefers to preserve the anonymity of the untold casualties of their extraordinary renditions, but their objectives are the same.

## **Conclusion**

As I stated in the introduction, this ongoing conflict is not one that can be neatly demarcated into camps of good and evil. Both sides have shed innocent blood and utilized hate speech and ideological violence to achieve their malignant objectives. There is no clearly defined “axis of evil” or “Great Satan” in this struggle. In fact, their very use of religious language to demonize their opponent is an affront to the very religions from which they are derived. Sadly, unless their propaganda is met with a constant barrage of truth, they will continue to gain support from those who have been mesmerized by their rhetoric. Unless the societies involved are willing to be honest about the real issues, there can be no hope for healing.

In closing, I would like to propose three things we can do to bring perspective to the conflict and build a path to de-escalation. First of all, it is of utmost importance that citizens who understand the power of words and religion enter into conversation with the purveyors of hate speech in democratic society. The democratic right to free speech should not be used for the fragmenting of society. Free speech in a democracy should be both constructive and liberating. Any other purpose is detrimental to civilization. In addition to providing a voice of reason to perpetrators of hate speech, it is also necessary to maintain lines of communication with those who are most susceptible to negative language. It may not be politically correct, but for the sake of community there are times when those who envision a harmonious society may have to stand against the crowd and say, “*Je ne suis pas Charlie Hebdo.*”

Secondly, if there is to be any hope for healing, both parties must be willing to be educated with the facts. For about five centuries, Western powers have engaged in global empire building and the current geo-political map stands as a constant reminder of their dominance and violent history. While a knowledge of the past does not excuse the so called Islamic State for their vandalistic crimes against civilization, it does provide a context for understanding their zeal. Had England, France and Russia not played political monopoly with the region—as European powers did with Africa just decades earlier—there probably would not have been a basis for their agenda. Having said this, it is also necessary to educate the so called Islamic State about the nature of the Ottoman State they hope to recreate. This was a state where Muslims welcomed and protected Jews, Christians and others. In fact, the very book upon which their faith is supposedly derived promotes tolerance and respect for people of other faiths.<sup>17</sup>

This leads us to the final proposal, for if we are to be successful in bringing healing to this conflict, we must be prepared to wrestle religion from the hands of those who give it a bad name. Too many are silent when religion is used for political and cultural purposes of control and oppression. While religion is often celebrated in community, it is both private and personal. Most of us are who we are primarily because of an accident of birth. However, even beyond that, our individual experiences and unique identities influence how we internalize and comprehend our religious confessions. Since none of us can really share the other's religious experience—even though we may profess the same religion, it behooves us to look for those common denominators within and between faith systems that enhances our common humanity. By doing this, we can find creative ways to truly confront ideological violence and hate speech.

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<sup>17</sup> “There is no compulsion in religion.” *Al Baqara* [2] 256