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HIS 520

tHE rOLE OF INTELLECTUAL CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY IN a post-secular american democracy

During the famed European Enlightenment in the 18th century, Christian theology and religious ideology stood at the forefront of many arguments between the intellectual “radicals” of the period and those who believed they were part of a heretical agenda. Today, we find ourselves in a similar, yet strikingly different situation, where the secular modernity that was established by the 18th century Enlightenment has started to give way to a new modern day one, which is quite possible responsible for a new type of democracy in the United States. The 18th century European intellectual Enlightenment declared that man had a duty to himself and to his fellow countrymen to question authority in the face of authoritative tradition. The goal was to bring about a new modern age of rational democratic reasoning. In more simple words, the Enlightenment thinkers were focused on encouraging the masses to think for themselves in the face of authority. Whereas previously it was common for subjects of a monarchy to follow the edicts of a king on what religion to follow or what political ideals to embody, suddenly they were called to decide for themselves what was morally correct and what was not, and whether or not the black and white boundaries established by kings really were just large areas of grey.

Today, we still hold the Enlightenment ideal of free will to think for ourselves dearly. Still, we find ourselves in similar struggles in political situations where governmental figures are putting forth religious agendas into their politics. It is painfully evident that we still live in a world where a nation still has an overt “mainstream” reserved for categories such as faith. Those who do not fall within the dominant category of belief thus prepare themselves to endure some eventual form of discrimination and prejudice from the upper classes in the social hierarchy, as well as from their own political leaders, who are supposed to protect their religious freedoms of expression in the first place. What to believe in terms of religious ideology has plagued intellectual, political, and sociocultural debates since the time of Plato and the Ancient philosophers.

During the Enlightenment the Church was brought under extreme scrutiny, as were those who served it. New ideals surrounding science, social conscience, radical politics, and the roles of the sexes seemingly “mocked religion and finally made it irrelevant. The state and the majority went their way, leaving only a trace of religion behind.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Instead of just being a belief system of that thus dictated the morally right from the blasphemous, now religion stood as an “invented category of analysis.”[[2]](#footnote-2) The fact that religion and the Christian faith had become a philosophical category was what caused most devout clergymen, nobles, and monarchs to openly fight against the rise of intellectual philosophy during the Age of Enlightenment. This kind of rational thinking quickly transitioned into being considered a form of heresy. In this paper, I thus plan to use contemporary documentation in the form of journal and newspaper articles, speeches, and books as a mirror image of the intellectual ideas written and preserved during the 18th century by the Enlightenment thinkers of Europe. These readings will in turn trace how the 18th century rise of modern secularization has encouraged continual philosophical debate on the notions of Christian theology which have led to the birth of a new Post-Secular Enlightenment, one which favors a new collaboration between faith and politics to produce n transformed American democracy. In this type of political strata, faith has been welcomed as a new strategy to perform checks and balances on the actions of the federal government.

Today there are many differing views about the status of Christian theology and religious principles and their importance for interpreting and making sense of our daily lives. Some feel that international politics, for example, are deteriorating because of the fact that religion seems to be “missing” from many modern-day lives. Alternatively, opponents of that viewpoint claim that inserting religious beliefs back into politics would further divide society and cause greater incentive for discrimination and prejudice. An article written by Allen Downey on behalf of Scientific American cites evidence supporting the former, reporting that “since 1990, the fraction of Americans with no religious affiliation has nearly tripled, from about 8 percent to 22 percent. Over the next 20 years, this trend will accelerate.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Downey supports his statistics with a claim that religious beliefs are nurtured, not instinctual. They are “determined by the environment people grow up in, including their family life and wider social influences…changes in the population are largely due to generational replacement.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

To the contrary, an essay written by Tony Carnes and Pauline Dolle for Comment Magazine dictates that by journeying through the streets and alleyways of New York City, it is possible to discern how the modern day mega-metropolis is a mirror of Biblical Israel. They posit whether the continued presence of so many churches on the streets of the city actually flouts arguments that secularization is erasing religion. Carnes and Dolle are thus only two of countless others questioning what the real status of Christian theology is. Specifically, they ask “Do the trends in NYC protend increased secularization around the world? Or is it a leading indicator for a reversal of secular trends and a resurgence of religious faith? Are we beginning to see the rise of post-secular cities – not quite religious capitals, but not secular either?”[[5]](#footnote-5) It is that third question that this document will attempt to clearly focus. With the rise of more advanced technology and the ability to have the world’s knowledge at our fingertips, it is our duty as sentient beings to question the realities of our world and determine whether the course we are riding is the most beneficial to the greater world around us. The fact that these questions are arising thus points to an emergence of a new philosophical debate, one that in many aspects traces back to the Age of Enlightenment.

Elaine A. Robinson defines theology as “the study of God, our language or discourse about and reflection upon God and the Christian faith as a whole. It is an intellectual examination and accounting of what Christians believe, but with an eye toward how we practice that faith in the world.”[[6]](#footnote-6) As rational beings we naturally want to know as much about the world as we can, which includes the knowledge of who and what God is and how we live a good and full life according to His dictations. The broad meaning of Christian theology is just another way to say that we are searching for meaning. Understanding our reality in relation to God is thus how we accomplish that task. As stated by Robinson, “the study of theology enables us to become conscious of our most deeply held beliefs and to ask ourselves if they are making sense of the world, especially in light of what we know to be true about God.”[[7]](#footnote-7) This search for ultimate truth is the connecting link between theologians, clergymen, and the intellectuals of the Enlightenment.

Still, it is also understood by most that since we are merely human, we will thus never have the power to completely understand what makes God “God.” Genesis 3:22-24 supports this. In the third chapter of the Creation story, we are brought to the Garden of Eden where Adam and Eve have broken God’s commandments by taking fruit from the Tree of Life, and thus becoming knowledgeable about the truth of good and evil. This is the creation of original sin. It reads: “Then the Lord God said, Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, lest he put forth his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever – therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken. He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a flaming sword which turned everyway, to guard the way to the tree of life.”[[8]](#footnote-8) The message of this passage is echoed by Robinson, who claims that “no matter how many years we might study theology, the knowledge of God remains somewhat elusive, and our eyes are continually opened to see anew the heights and depths of God.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Our humanity thus depends on the notion of us remaining ignorant of at least some portion of God’s plan, for to have all the answers would defeat the purpose of having religious belief in the first place. If we had all the answers to life, to good and evil, then there would be no need for guidance and we would inevitably fall into sin.

Humans are prone to a state of nature that some prescribe to be self-destructive because of our tendency to constantly search for reason in the face of faith. Some historians and theologians think that this framework “manifestly contradicts and supplants the grounding conception of the human essence that is found in the suprarational revelation given in the Bible. For the Bible depicts mankind’s miraculous creation by a loving providential Deity who placed His creature in paradise that has been lost by a sinful Fall whose terrible consequences can be overcome only through a redemptive atonement requiring the intervention and guidance of divine grace, ultimately in a shattering messianic moment.”[[10]](#footnote-10) This statement, made by Thomas L. Pangle, signifies a belief that practical reason is fallible because while philosophical in nature, it inevitably derives from some kind of Christian theological foundation. He is privy to the idea that this fact deems practical reason as being unreachable for non-Christian believers. Because the Christian tradition is what established natural law in the world, non-Christians are still appealing to an ideal of Christianity, thus making its edict of natural law universal. Whereas intellectuals during the Enlightenment believed in putting individual human rights and freedoms above duty and obligation, Pangle subscribes to a more conservative belief that decrees the opposite. He states that it doesn’t matter whether the freedoms come from practical reason or faith, because these rights are still “morally subordinate to or derivative from the higher ruling authority of the political community, viewed as a part of the larger moral community that is the cosmos or creation as a whole.”[[11]](#footnote-11) This reflection rounds out his propositions for a return to faith-based reasoning in foundational political principles, which posits that Westerns traditions are, in fact, universal. Even in the most secular of communities, subscribers to this belief put Christian understanding of reality as an ever-remaining power source.

All these overarching philosophies on Christian theology are first and foremost rooted in the basics of philosophy itself, which was a dominating force during the Enlightenment. Since that period and through the centuries to the modern day, philosophy has guided human nature through history in creating values and following them. This first requires that “one attempt to incorporate…the deepest and most comprehensive values of the past…and do so knowing that the creative achievement to which one has given one’s heart will inevitably be confronted by opposing interpretative achievements of ‘enemy’ creators and lovers.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Philosophical reasoning thus became the motor of modernity and secular government.

During the Enlightenment and the age of democratic revolution, there were several factors coming into play: new sources of authority based on human capability; confidence and optimism; skepticism; universal reason; happiness and human nature; and attitudes reflecting a top-down movement regarding education of the masses. For the purpose of this discussion, however, focus will be directed mainly toward those new sources of authority and self-interest, happiness and human nature.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Kieron O’Hara depicts the “Enlightened man” as one that “challenges orthodoxy, argues against authority when his reason is compromised, and understands the limits to his reason dictated by the roles he plays in society.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Old sources of authority were the church and the monarchy, especially a king or other kind of ruler. Before the birth of the Enlightenment, these select elite were thought to be directly divined by God himself, and thus it was thought legitimate to believe whatever the king believed. Particularly in respects to religion, not believing in the faith promoted by the king could be so dangerous as to result in execution. The enlightened thinkers turned this notion on its tail as they brought science to the forefront of authority. Anxious to help drive the world into a more modern station, they believed that tradition should be replaced by toleration in the sense that “people with opposing views should be able to live peacefully alongside each other, as long as those views did not affect other people materially.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

The change in religious authority brought individualism to a higher stage of importance. In his book, The Enlightenment: A Beginner’s Guide, Kieron O’Hara notes that “a wealth of psychological theorizing took place in the Enlightenment to show how people were able to deploy reason, and that in turn was an important factor in the confidence that was also characteristic to the era. Some argued that reason was a type of perception, analogous to eyesight.”[[16]](#footnote-16) It is this turn to philosophical reason that brought about the rise in revolutionary ideals which were directly related to a desire for “inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

Antoon Braeckman puts forth in his article “The Moral Inevitability of Enlightenment and the Precariousness of the Moment: Reading Kant’s ‘What is Enlightenment?’” that the Enlightenment was a natural process that was inevitable because as humanity evolved along with time, individual thinking would continue to gain force and have impacts on society. He states that “Enlightenment is the human being’s emergence from his self-incured minority. Minority is the inability to make use of one’s own understanding without direction from another…”[[18]](#footnote-18) The resulting revolutions that took place during the 18th century were fought because of a newfound strength in individual attempts to use their own understanding to influence their free will and thus their actions. This kind of ideal is important to the establishment of democracy because it makes it so that when an “independent thinker” does have something of importance to share, they have open opportunity to share their reasonings to the general public without fear of arrest, flouting, or even execution from a king. Reason acts as a go-between between a people and their ruler, which in the case of American democracy, for example, is an elected President, Senator, Representative, Governor, and so on. Braeckman states that this kind of political atmosphere is the best way to “drawing the people’s attention to natural rights and duties, and…they are also best placed to request the ruler to respect these natural rights of the people.”[[19]](#footnote-19) In 18th century America, this existed with the ratifying of the Constitution and the establishment of the Senate and House of Representatives, which ensured that each state would get equal representation appropriate for their population.

The desire for individual autonomy and independence as fought for by the Haitians and also to an extent by the Americans rose as a result of pro-democracy rhetoric. Monarchies with individual rulers and a handful of elite nobles and clergymen were starting to feel constricting and oppressive, and as philosophical reason started to gain a foothold in intelligent debate more people started arguing for a type of government that reflected the desires and needs of all the people, not just the wealthy. They wanted a government that would be more accepting of diverse thinking and that would judge individual merit based on skill and hard work rather than social status.

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Religion and Christian theology thus plays and important part not only in inspiring the establishment of democracies in Europe and the Americas, but also as a defense and warning against the “radical” thinking of the Enlightenment. For example, ever since the 18th century there has been an obvious move by opponents of the Enlightenment to dub it as a failure, or even as ‘fiction.’ Jonathan Sheehan puts forth a seemingly accurate claim then that considering how successfully the church dominated society before the Enlightenment began, dismissing the Enlightenment “evacuates the landscape of what was traditionally understood as the force of irreligion, leaving religion its absolute freedom.”[[22]](#footnote-22) On the other hand, philosophes likewise found the acceptance of Enlightenment ideals as banishing religion in return for the birth of modernity. These arguments still exist today, and it is evident even more in the rising platform of religious politics in the United States. This resurgence of religion as political authority exists in opposition to most who believe the Enlightenment to be the signifier of secular society. If secularization is no longer an inevitable factor of modern politics and the Enlightenment, then it is appropriate to say that there some striking contrasts between the meaning of secularization in the 18th century and what it means now. This is where the support for arguments suggesting the emergence of ‘post-secularization’ gain credence. Whereas in the 18th century secularization at its birth signified a complete separation of religion and politics, now, particularly in the United States, we are looking at a political environment that favors inclusion of both to create a democracy that is not inherently stripped of religious rhetoric, but not dependent on it as an authority figure either. Today, secularization seems to be moving toward a type of political society that rests somewhere in between those two ends of the spectrum.

Too much historiography on the Enlightenment and the evolution of secular modernity seems to focus on either just the philosophy of the Enlightenment and refute the religious arguments or dismiss the philosophy of the Enlightenment and blasphemous and reiterate the divine freedom of Christian faith. The purpose of this particular discussion is not to contribute solely to one argument, but to simply evaluate how and why the United States has come to be in the political sphere it is currently occupying. The Founding Fathers, in establishing the Constitution and the individual human freedoms granted by the Bill of Rights, started the motion for conversations about the combination of religion and politics that has brought us to our current political crisis. If you look at today’s political campaigns, particularly of far-right republicans, you will see that Christian theology has once again started to play a major role in influencing the public’s political allegiances. Still, there are those who wish to reintegrate religion in politics so as to follow the decrees of God and the Bible, and those who wish to do so because it further embraces the rights fought for and established by the Founding Fathers 240 years ago.

For instance, this past summer Jeff Sessions delivered a speech he titled “Our Concepts of Religious Freedom” to the Alliance Defending Freedom at the Summit on Religious Liberty in California. He stated that “Our concepts of religious freedom came to us through development of the Western heritage of faith and reason…religion is not an accident of history or a passing circumstance. It is at the core of human experience, and as close to a universal phenomenon as any.”[[23]](#footnote-23) The speech seems to reflect a notion that while one particular type of faith might be universal, the fact that everyone everywhere believes in something is. Even atheists fall under this pretext just because they believe in not believing. Everyone, therefore, has faith in something that resembles religion or theological thought. In turn, this leads to a later statement in the speech which is: “This Department of Justice will never allow this secular government of ours to demand that sincere religious beliefs be abandoned. We will not require American citizens to give intellectual assent to doctrines that are contrary to their religious beliefs…the federal government will actively find ways to accommodate people of all faiths.”[[24]](#footnote-24) These words admittedly seem admirable in implication, but we have yet to see this kind of federal attitude toward faiths other than Christianity or Judaism in the United States. A secular government is not supposed to take sides in issues that include religion or theology, they are supposed to remain neutral or act as mediator. Sessions’ speech, however, is evidence that remaining neutral still involves political actions such as the speech itself, which promises to accommodate religious peoples, thus taking their side. Sessions’ audience was ripe with nuns, pastors, and other religious figures, without whom the speech surely would have received a much more negative reaction.

The evidence included in these pages will thus serve to fill in the gaps in existing historiography on Christian theology and the Enlightenment in order to accommodate this new world of democracy that so many live in. In turn, it will also evaluate how the transitions occurring in contemporary society both mirror (and differ from) those that occurred at the end of the 18th century.

Every age has seen its share of minds trying to understand what they deem as universal and enduring questions. Among these is the debate over the place of religion in government as a figure of authority. Ever since enlightened ideas of philosophical reason entered into the public sphere in the 18th century, those faithful to the agenda of Christian theology have done their best to try and preserve the Christian tradition as the voice of reason instead of logic and rationality. Religious leaders were opposed to the idea of God becoming a simple item of knowledge instead of a matter of divine revelation that is the compass of all moral truth.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Matthew Kelly states that “every culture is the fruit of the ideas and attitudes of its people.”[[26]](#footnote-26) Today, as during the Age of Enlightenment, one argument against the notion of secular modernity is against the value of individualism. Individualism is defined as “the habit or principle of being independent and self-reliant” or “a social theory favoring freedom of action for individuals over collective or state control.” For 18th century philosophes that theory simply pointed to the human right to use their free will. Opponents to the theory of individualism claimed that the ideal enveloped an underlining agenda for self-indulgence, with no policing of thought or action, at the detriment of society. Arguments center around the moral compass of individualism. It seems that opponents are ignoring the fundamental point of individualism: freedom of expression and the right to exercise free will. However, these freedoms are not meant to grant an opportunity to do “whatever you want, wherever you want, without the interference of any other person or party.”[[27]](#footnote-27) In reality, when you look at the majority of humans with the right to exercise free will and expression, most use their human freedoms for good. It is only a select few who meld individualism with a lack of conscience for right and wrong.

What is needed, therefore, is a new understanding of what “individualism” really means in a democratic sphere that is growing away from strict secularization into something that accommodates both modernity and faith – a post-secularization.

The first step to understanding what it means to live in a post-secular democracy is to understand how stances toward religion have influenced how one perceives “citizenship.” In the middle ages and through the early 19th century, the concept of religion “use used rarely and mainly to denote a fundamental Truth that was policed by the ecclesiastical authorities with the aid of the civil authorities.”[[28]](#footnote-28) There was neither anything resembling our modern idea of what a ‘citizen’ is either.

Social hierarchy in pre-Modern Europe was derived from the idea that it was “God’s Universe.” This encompassed “different levels of created being, in which every level is encompassed by a higher level, culminating in the totality of God. It also reflected the very different institutional politics: “spiritual” and “temporal” applied to the overlapping jurisdictions of medieval church and civil administration.”[[29]](#footnote-29) It was thus common to governments to demand those they deemed citizens to conform toward the monarchy’s accepted stance toward religion.

Today, the United States government cannot force any citizen to conform to any specific religious belief. Modern religious freedom is defined as not only the freedom to choose between religious beliefs personally, but “also the freedom to do things within the religious domain that contravene the norms operating outside it, such as ordaining only men to the priesthood…”[[30]](#footnote-30) However, it is still evident that governmental leaders still attempt to define a “correct posture” toward religion for mainstream society. Going back to the speech given by Jeff Sessions in July, for example, it is plain that he was advocating for a government and society that had more respect and compunction for religion. He and other proponents of a government that accommodates the faithful seem to understand those without religious beliefs as lesser or as missing something vital in their philosophical life. Our freedoms of speech and expression mean that our leaders have the right to express their opinions, however, they must understand that speaking out against a specific belief or against non-believers has risks. This is because a post-secular democracy can evolve in two ways: one which goes back to the more fundamental aspects of religion as favored in pre-Modern Europe, or one that accepts a political sphere that is a combination of secular and religious forces that best benefit the masses. Religion thus becomes about a government’s ability to exercise certain powers over citizens, and alters the way sovereignty is performed. It certainly points to a need for more discussion in both political and social arenas about the place of religious philosophies, especially those that are predominantly Christian, in a country with the most diverse ethnic and religious populations in the world.

Previous attempts to understand the state of our democracy have tried to trace its evolution from the time of the first European settlers in America. Today, democracy is assumed to be among the most normal forms of government. However, as stated by Jared Hickman in his article, “The Theology of Democracy,” “democracy not only operates as a god-term rhetorically but also often harbors theological presumptions about God, specifically God’s relation to human freedom and history. With lines being drawn between American redemptionism and an equally imperious radical Islamism, it is more important than ever to assess the theological origins and implications of modern democracy.”[[31]](#footnote-31) He further claims that “to question the view that Christian theology contains the theory of modern liberal democracy is not to deny the theological sources of democratic theory, but to demand that we consider those sources more carefully.”[[32]](#footnote-32)

Democracy in America found its roots in the Puritan theology, which is ironic, since the Puritans originally fought against democracy as a profane. They believed it blasphemous to try and integrate God’s presence and work into human actions, and this is what laid the groundwork for democracy with an emphasis on separation of church and state. At its American origins, however, some thought the democracy was “inseparable” from theology. “Over the last 40 years, an appreciation of the continuity of Puritan theology and the Whig science of politics in the United States, a continuity explicitly recognized by many of the founders themselves, has taken hold in the historiography of republicanism.”[[33]](#footnote-33) Today many historians see religions theology as anti-democratic. The truth is, however, that it is impossible to have democracy without the challenges of antidemocratic means alongside it. Arguments for maintaining religious foundations in modern American democracy need thus to re-conceptualize what religion means. Furthermore, sociopolitical debate must accommodate the democratization of theology with the theologizing of democracy. This is the only way we shall be able to both trace the evolution of liberal democracy and pinpoint the influences for the emergence of a new liberal post-secular democracy.

This proposed framework serves to do more than just pit democracy against religion or vice versa. It works to put both on equal pedestals in order to understand their fundamental places in modern society. Visualize how our nation would function differently without the presence of religious theology. Visualize further the way the geographical dynamic of the country would change without the presence of churches and cathedrals on our streets. Religious institutions work alongside the government to protect citizens from oppression and from outside harm. The knowledge that America was founded on notions of religious freedom in themselves place the American democracy on a building block of religious rhetoric. At its roots, therefore, democracy and theology are mixed in at least one way. The Enlightenment thinkers sought to put reason as superior to religion or divine revelation, and religion and divine revelation sought to thus suppress and dismiss the moral legitimacy of philosophical reasoning. This framework thus suggests that a successful post-secular democracy does neither of those things, views both religious and secular forces as being on the same scale. When one talks, the other listens. There is above all space for each to work alongside the other in order to best serve the citizens of America in a way that accommodates religious and democratic freedoms instead of infringing upon them.

This research fits in with those historians and writers who believe that religious interference in politics is quite different that religious toleration in politics. I belong to an interesting generation where many of us were raised with seeming traditional American values, including various forms of religion (i.e. Christianity). Yet, somehow we have become a population that has grown and evolved with modern society as more liberal ideas about religion and politics are put forth in government and society. One reason I believe that there is a positive way to include religious toleration in political communication is because in masses I commonly hear my own priest touching upon various sociopolitical issues plaguing the country, and while he is of an older generation and someone who I would have thought belonged to the group of people vying for more Christian-influenced legislation, he is actually very cognizant and accepting of the way in which the social world we live in has changed. I even like to think of how our current Pope treats social issues like abortion, same-sex marriage and LGBTQ issues, immigration, sexual assault and women’s rights, and so on. I am continually surprised when I see written proclamations from him because most all of them have been about acceptance of diversity and above all using God’s word to aid and welcome as many people as possible, not alienate or target those who believe in different gods or believe in no god at all. I concur with those writers, such as Tony Carnes and Pauline Dolle, Jared Hickman, Timothy Fitzgerald, and surprisingly, even Jeff Sessions who call for more recollection of the notions on which our country was founded. Some of these mentioned figures believe this for more strict religious reasons, such as for re-invigorating the religious populations in America so as to increase the numbers back to a dominant status, but I think it is important because it emphasizes a kind of religion that can be considered in political discussion without fear of indoctrinating interferences: civil religion.

This term, which Robert N. Bellah soundly supports in his article, “Civil Religion in America,” states that “the God of the civil religion is not only rather “unitarian,” he is also on the austere side, much more related to order, law, and right than to salvation and love. Even though he is somewhat deist in cast, he is by no means simply a watchmaker God. He is actively interested and involved in history, with a special concern for America.”[[34]](#footnote-34) A post-secular democracy in America, therefore, seems to emphasize a religious presence in politics only so far as to be a sort of guiding principle, or conscience, that is utilized in the making of new laws, taxes, social norms and regulations, and in the appreciation of America’s diverse ethnic population. It is a not an almighty force that gives out strict decrees for us to follow as servants of God, but simple life lessons that will help to form a better nation, and a better world, for all those who live in it, or at least attempts to do so. If it can be used as a way to unite more people and create more opportunity for success and equality, then it should be accepted as valid idealization for political use when appropriate, and not used to accelerate the agenda of a particular group or political party to exert power over others.

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