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Leisure Studies and Spirituality: A Christian Critique

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Abstract

Conceptual discussions of leisure have often had spiritual overtones or linked leisure with spirituality. The links between the two concepts are becoming widely recognized and discussed in a wide range of leisure studies areas: therapeutic recreation, camping, recreational land management, outdoor recreation, tourism, and community recreation. Increasingly empirical research is being conducted on this relationship. Christians respond in a variety of ways to the increased social scientific interest in the relationship between leisure and spirituality: for some Christian spirituality is the only true spirituality; some compartmentalize or dichotomize spirituality; some believe non-Christians experience spirituality; some believe that spirituality reaches its fullest potential in relationship with God; and some see spirituality as a complex process. Positively, the renewed interest in spirituality may be seen as recognition of spiritual need and an opportunity for introducing Christian spirituality and the Christian spiritual tradition of leisure. However there are also areas of concern. First, there is a need to expand the “interiority” of contemporary discussions of leisure and spirituality and to emphasize transcendence. Second, contemporary discussions of leisure and spirituality often focus on the inner self with little discussion of relationships with others or of community. Third, there is a need to go beyond spiritual experience to spiritual well-being. Fourth, as the majority of theoretical reflection and empirical investigation on leisure and spirituality has focused on nature-based recreation and spirituality, more emphasis needs to be placed on all forms of leisure in all settings. Fifth, as the vast majority of studies on leisure and spirituality have been small scale qualitative studies, the adoption of various methods of studying and understanding the relationship between leisure and spirituality needs to be encouraged. Sixth, there is a need within the leisure studies field to make connections with the 20 centuries of Christian spirituality.

Leisure and Spirituality: An Overview

Conceptual discussions of leisure have often had spiritual overtones or linked leisure with spirituality (Heintzman, 2003). This link is especially true of the state-of-being concept of leisure which Kraus (1990) defined as "a spiritual and mental attitude, a state of inward calm, contemplation, serenity, and openness" (p. 49). Contemporary leisure scholars have stressed the importance of the connection between leisure and spirituality. Parker (1976) noted that "Separated from...[a] spiritual view, the idea of recreation has the aimless circularity of simply restoring us to a state in which we can best continue our work" (p. 107). Godbey (1989) wrote, "Recreation and leisure behaviour is ultimately infinite, nonrational, and full of meaning which is, or can be, spiritual" (p. 622). "Leisure worthy of the name," stated Goodale (1994), "must be filled with purpose, compelled by love, and wrapped in the cosmic and the spiritual" (p. 2). Within the therapeutic recreation field, Howe-Murphy and Murphy (1987) suggested that the leisure experience is characterized by a mystical or spiritual feeling of being connected with oneself, with all else, and a sense of oneness with the universe. In a paper on leisure counselling, McDowell (1986) wrote:

Leisure awareness must include the awareness and expression of one's sense of spirit...The greatest challenge of the leisure profession as a whole, and therapeutic recreators specifically, is to know the spirit well...this spirit is the life

force energy behind the hope and will that heals and keeps one well. It is what makes leisure Leisure, not as something you do, but as something you feel deeply inside. (p. 37)

Discussion of leisure and spirituality has now gone beyond brief conceptual associations of the two ideas. The links between the two concepts are becoming widely recognized and discussed in a wide range of recreation and leisure studies areas: therapeutic recreation, camping, recreational land management, outdoor/experiential/adventure/environmental education, tourism and community recreation (Heintzman, 2003). In addition there is increasing social scientific interest in the relationship between leisure and spirituality. As part of a larger work on the benefits of leisure, McDonald and Schreyer (1991) outlined possible spiritual benefits of leisure participation and leisure settings. Subsequently, in their edited book, *Nature and the Human Spirit*, Driver, Dustin, Baltic, Elsner, and Peterson (1996), explored the "spiritual meanings that nature holds for human beings" in the hope that "a more thorough understanding of these meanings could improve management of public lands" (p. 3).

Increasingly empirical research is being conducted on the relationship between leisure and spirituality (Heintzman, 2009). For example, in a quantitative study with a sample of 219 people, Ragheb (1993) investigated whether leisure participation and satisfaction were related to perceived wellness, including spiritual wellness. Frequency of leisure participation and level of leisure satisfaction were found to be positively associated with perceived wellness and all of its components. Higher levels of satisfaction with the relaxational and aesthetic-environmental components of leisure were dominant in their contributions to perceived wellness, including spiritual wellness. Heintzman and Mannell (1999) conducted a more comprehensive study with 268 participants that investigated the relationships between four dimensions of leisure (activity, motivation, setting, time) and spiritual well-being. Significant positive relationships were found between spiritual well-being and overall leisure activity participation, as well as, engagement in the leisure activity categories of personal development activities, cultural activities, outdoor activities and hobbies. Higher levels of leisure motivation were associated with spiritual well-being, as was leisure engaged in for intellectual and stimulus-avoidance motives. Those who pursued leisure in quiet urban recreation areas and their own homes reported higher levels of spiritual health. Heintzman (2000) conducted a qualitative study with eight people who had an expressed interest in spirituality to uncover the processes that link leisure with spiritual well-being. Participants associated their leisure experiences and activities with their spirituality and it was found that:

An attitude of openness, balance in life, nature settings, settings of personal or human history, settings of quiet, solitude and silence, and "true to self" activities were all conducive to spiritual well-being, while busyness, noisy settings and activities, and incongruent activities were detrimental... (Heintzman, 2000, p. 69)

Using a phenomenological approach, Schmidt and Little (2007) explored the spiritual dimension of leisure experiences for 24 self-selected individuals. They observed that the spiritual dimension of leisure experiences involved triggers (e.g., nature, newness and

difference, challenge, ritual and tradition), responses (e.g., emotion and sensation, struggle for control, overcoming, and reflection and contemplation) and outcomes (e.g., awareness, connection, growth, freedom).

Leisure and Spirituality: Christian Responses

How should Christians view the increased social scientific interest in the relationship between leisure and spirituality? Various viewpoints seem to exist. A number of years ago a discussion related to spirituality took place on the Christian Recreation Listserv, a listserv administered by Baylor University. Approximately 50 people from various Christian traditions subscribed to this listserv. The dialogue on spirituality reflected a number of different views of how Christians understand the relationship between leisure and spirituality. The discussion was initiated by a student doing her honour's thesis on spirituality in the wilderness, in particular, the spiritual meaning of a wilderness canoe trip for Christians. She defined "Spirituality as the essence of relating to God, to ourselves, to others, and to our environment. Spirituality is revealed through these relationships" (Walters, 1997). Responses varied. Some believed that spiritual experiences are not possible without God: "Can one have a spiritual experience without the presence of God? Personally, I don't think so. We all know that it is possible (and a common occurrence) to get that 'feel good, really swell' feeling about something, but without Christ as the foundation, what is the basis of that feeling?" (Egerton, 1997). In a similar vein some wanted to have nothing to do with non-Christian spirituality, and lamented the fact that Christians have not taken advantage of this opportunity: "I would enjoy hearing more...unless you are talking about worshipping trees, birds, & dirt" (Weathersbee, 1997a)... "It is unfortunate that people who are worshipping rocks & trees have seen a significant growth in the use of outdoor rec. Yet as Christians, we have not yet seemed to capitalize on the incredible Spirit facilitating that an outdoor adventure seems to bring" (Weathersbee, 1997b).

Others dichotomized spirituality into transcendent and non-transcendent components: "I know it is a little simplified but I compartmentalize spirituality. I think of spirituality as [relating to ourselves, to others, to the environment]. I see Spirituality as the God thing" (Connally, 1997). Others also seemed to compartmentalize life: "I think that my Question is this...Can something else, other than a 'spiritual' experience be as rewarding? I think that one can have an experience that is completely away from the "Spiritual" order of things and still be a part of God's plan. For example, one of the greatest times for me to experience the Lord is when I am out on a lake with my dog looking at the ducks fly in" (Nay, 1997). In response to Nay, Wilson (1997) wrote, "I believe that if you know the Lord the experience of watching a duck land on the lake can be an instance of having the Holy Spirit speak to you. Yet if someone does not know the Lord or understand the relationship that nature has with Him then watching that instance of God's beauty would be empty just as all life without Christ is empty." In contrast, Hermann (1997) stated that "I am sure that there are people whose lives are not all empty without Christ. There are many other religions that fulfil people's needs." The initiator of the discussion stated that "...a spiritual experience cannot be experienced to its fullest without God. God is the thread in which all things

hold together...a spiritual experience is not complete without the acknowledgement of God as part of it" (Walters, 1997). A more complex understanding was presented by Wilke (1997):

It is helpful to think of Spirituality as an extended process that begins with the creation of a soul that has the imprint of God's image. Inherently from birth, life is full of events and experiences that can move one into spirituality, e.g. love or its lack, pain, again and again there is creation. This natural bent toward spiritual things is never lost, and the search for an appropriate reality does not end though it can be stagnated or diverted and often remains unfulfilled. I believe that God has a glorious plan to draw all men unto himself, and he is as present and active in the early stages of spirituality as in the "later" stages. Rebelliousness, false religions, etc. can be looked upon as the evidence of this continuing spiritual quest of people...The whole business of God drawing all men unto himself is far too complex for you and I to have total knowledge about or to be skillful enough to control.

From this dialogue we can see that Christians respond in a variety of ways: for some Christian spirituality is the only true spirituality; some compartmentalize or dichotomize spirituality; some believe non-Christians experience spirituality; some believe that spirituality reaches its fullest potential in relationship with God; and some see spirituality as a complex process.

Leisure and Spirituality: An Opportunity for Christians

Should Christian leisure researchers see the increased interest in leisure and spirituality as an exciting opportunity to promote genuine Christian spirituality or is it a cause for concern? Chamberlain (1997) noted that Christians should not be surprised by the increased interest in spirituality. Christians have long believed that humans are created with a capacity to relate to God, what Blaise Pascal (1670/1966) described as a craving and abyss that "can be filled only...by God himself" (p. 75) or what Augustine (398/1949) was thinking when he explained that the human "heart is restless" until it finds its rest in God (p. 3). If this is true then humanity will always have a spiritual quest. The current interest in spirituality appears consistent with the human capacity to relate to God.

Peterson (as cited in Chamberlain, 1997) has suggested that the current, widespread fascination with spirituality is probably evidence of pathology not health; sickness has provoked this fascination. According to Peterson the materialist and temporal tendency in our society destroys two essential elements of the spiritual dimension of human life: connectedness with other humans; and the desire for transcendence. As one leisure scholar has pointed out, individuals searching to find value and meaning in life in contemporary societies have often become quite disillusioned (Compton, 1994). While technology, material wealth and affluence have been thought to be essential components of the good "life," they have not proven to be so:

Despite the fact that we are now healthier and grow to be older, despite the fact that even the least affluent among us are surrounded by material luxuries undreamed of even a few decades ago..., and regardless of all the stupendous scientific knowledge we can summon at will, people often end up feeling that

their lives have been wasted, instead of being filled with happiness their years were spent in anxiety and boredom. (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 2)

The renewed interest in spirituality may be seen as the recognition of spiritual need and an opportunity for introducing Christian spirituality and the Christian spiritual tradition of leisure. The increasing interest in leisure and spirituality provides Christian leisure scholars with the opportunity to engage others in dialogue and to invite people to consider Christian spirituality in a way that is relevant to this spiritually conscious age. Christian leisure scholars can affirm and build upon the current academic interest in leisure and spirituality. The example of the apostle Paul is helpful. In Acts 17:16-34 we read of Paul's reaction to an idol that had the inscription: "To an unknown God" (New International Version). Instead of condemning this idol as a false form of spirituality, he viewed it as an implied admission of spiritual need and openness. He took advantage of the opportunity to talk about a relationship with God through Christ as a way to meet spiritual need. This example is relevant for leisure scholars and researchers when they encounter increasing amounts of leisure literature and research which focuses on spirituality. Our overall reaction as Christians to the increased interest in leisure and spirituality ought to be positive as it is a reflection of the universal human desire for God however this trend also holds several concerns for Christians.

Leisure and Spirituality: Concerns for Christians

There are at least six areas of concern within the current study of leisure and spirituality. First, there is a need to expand the "interiority" of contemporary discussions of leisure and spirituality and to emphasize transcendence. For example, McDonald and Schreyer (1991), in their chapter "The Spiritual Benefits of Leisure" suggested that a general definition of spirituality might be "an individual's attempt to understand his/her 'place' in the universe" (p. 179). They went on to state that "Spirit refers to the nontangible elements of existence upon which life may be presumed to be based" (p. 179). Much of the discussion of spirituality within the leisure studies field is a kind of interiority. In this view, which often omits the concept of the Divine, spirituality is basically a human dimension. In contrast, Christian spirituality is based on a trusting, obedient and growing personal relationship with a transcendent, personal, creator God. Christian spirituality does include an inward focus and an inward transformation, however, the Christian tradition asserts that God is not fundamentally within us waiting to be discovered. Thus Christians in the leisure studies field may want to use contemporary, generic definitions of spirituality as starting points, but may want to include the notion of the divine and the notion of transcendence in any writing and research on the topic. For example, Christians may want to make use of measurement tools such as the Spiritual Well-Being Scale (Ellison & Smith, 1991) which includes a religious well-being sub-scale containing items that refer to God and assess the transcendent dimension of spirituality.

Second, contemporary discussions of leisure and spirituality often focus on the inner self with little discussion of relationships with others or of community. The quest for spirituality is undertaken on an individual basis to gain private benefit. There is a desire to develop the inner self, to become self-actualized. However, Christian spirituality "is not a matter of individual

personal development. It is growing in the body with the other members of it" (Chan, 1998, p. 110). Bernard (as quoted in Thornton, 1964, p. 25) goes so far as to say that "If anyone makes himself his own master in the spiritual life, he makes himself scholar to a fool." Hemingway (1996), a leisure studies scholar, is critical of the spiritual conceptualization of leisure as he sees it as a subjective, internal mental experience that does not place leisure against the political and social structures of modern western society. However, biblical spirituality balances an inner spiritual focus with involvement in the world: "Christian spirituality may be inward in that it consists of union with Christ and love for God, but that means it is also outward ... active Christian life involves discipleship, and Christian spirituality must entail acting with compassion, mercy, and a desire for justice" (Grenz, 1994, pp. 35-36). Jesus stated that we are to take up our cross and follow him (e.g., Mark 8:34), and in addition to loving God we are to love our neighbour as our self (e.g., Mark 12:31). Spiritual life includes more than personal spiritual benefits. True spirituality is expressed in social relationships and also in social justice as "an authentic spiritual life always pushes one back into the world" (Willard, 1995, p. 17).

Third, there is a need to go beyond spiritual experience to spiritual well-being. Immense significance is presently given to "experience" within discussions of leisure and spirituality. Most of the research related to leisure and spirituality emphasizes experience (e.g., Fox, 1997; Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999; Stringer & McAvoy, 1992, Schmidt & Little, 2007). Haluza-Delay (2000) criticized studies focused on spiritual experience as they focus on the immediate experience and pleasant emotional states rather than long term consequences of the experiences and possible life transformation. The last major section of the book *Nature and the Human Spirit* (Driver et al., 1996) is a discussion of future research directions. This discussion focuses on experiences: psychologically deep experiences, optimal experiences, leisure and touristic states; religious, mystical and spiritual experiences, nature experiences, nature-based peak experiences; hard-to-define nature based human experiences, and nature-based spiritual experiences. While the introductory overview to this book mentions "the use of natural areas for mental well-being and associated effects on physical well-being" (p. 5), the notion of spiritual well-being is never introduced. As Grenz (1994) noted, the focus of the Christian tradition has not been to nurture spiritual experience in and of itself but rather to foster a relationship with Jesus. Furthermore, the focus of Scripture is not so much on spiritual experience, but on a lifestyle that leads to spiritual transformation (Rom. 12:1-2; 2 Cor. 3:18; Eph. 4:22-24). Spiritual experiences are not necessarily significant in a person's life unless they have a transforming impact upon the person. Chandler, Kolander, and Holden (1992) suggested that the mere occurrence of spiritual experiences does not necessarily result in spiritual development unless the experiences are dealt with and integrated into one's life. Or as John of the Cross (1589/1991) put it, "Delightful feelings do not of themselves lead the soul to God, but rather cause it to become attached to delightful feelings" (p. 747). Thus, Christians may want to go beyond research focused on spiritual experiences to research focused on spiritual well-being.

Social scientific study of spirituality has been developing during the past quarter century. Within this context, the concept of spiritual wellness was developed. Moberg (1971, 1974, 1978,

1979a, 1979b, 1986) stressed the role of religious and spiritual factors to well-being. Ellison (1983; Paloutzin & Ellison, 1982) proposed that quality of life involves material, psychological, and spiritual well-being, and developed the Spiritual Well-Being Scale (SWBS) to help examine this issue. Since the early 1980s the SWBS has been used several hundreds of times in a variety of settings to study spiritual well-being (Ellison & Smith, 1991). The development of the concept of "spiritual wellness" has provided social scientists with a way of getting an empirical "handle" on spirituality. Despite the growing attention being given to the social scientific study of spirituality, research on the relationship between leisure and spirituality has lagged behind as leisure researchers have struggled with how to conceptualize and measure spirituality. While scales are available for the measurement of spiritual well-being, they have received little use in the leisure studies field.

While the research studies that have been conducted on leisure and spirituality are interesting and suggestive, the general lack of attention to the relationship between leisure and spiritual wellness is surprising since a popular area of current research within leisure studies is the study of the benefits of leisure which includes the connection between leisure and wellness or health. The leisure and health relationship has been identified as one of the most significant research topics that needs study (Iso-Ahola, 1988, 1994, 1997). While wellness, in a holistic sense, refers to a state of well-being which includes physical, mental, emotional, social, and spiritual components, little research has been conducted on the relationships between leisure and holistic wellness or the spiritual component of wellness on its own. Most contemporary leisure scholars do not even refer to all five components of health. Iso-Ahola (1997) referred to health as a "general concept that refers to the absence of illness, but it also covers the more positive aspects: physical, mental and social well-being" (p. 131). No mention is made of spiritual well-being. Yet, if, as some writers suggest (e.g., Chandler et al., 1992), spiritual wellness is an integrative dimension of wellness, it is important that more than just the relationships between leisure and physical and mental health be investigated. A positive development is the inclusion of a chapter on leisure and spiritual health in the recent book *Leisure, Health and Wellness: Making the Connections* (Payne, Ainsworth, & Godbey, 2010). Thus, one possible direction for research on leisure and spirituality is to explore the relationship between leisure and spiritual wellness (Caldwell & Smith, 1988; Heintzman, 2000, 2002a; Heintzman & Mannell, 1999, 2003).

Fourth, the majority of theoretical reflection on leisure and spirituality has involved nature-based recreation and spirituality. As McDonald and Schreyer (1991) noted, "Perhaps one of the most generally cited notions of extreme states of consciousness and spiritual endeavour related to leisure is the wilderness experience (p. 184). In addition, most of the empirical studies on leisure and spirituality have explored the relationship between nature-based leisure experiences and concepts related to spirituality (e.g., Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999; Fox 1997; Heintzman, 2002b, 2007, 2008, 2010; Stringer & McAvoy, 1992; Sweatman & Heintzman, 2004). While wilderness and nature can play an important place in Christian spirituality as Bratton (1993) documented in her book, *Christianity, Wilderness and Wildlife*, Christian

spirituality is not limited to these places. Future research needs to place more emphasis on all forms of leisure in all settings, as opposed to an over-emphasis upon the wilderness setting, which is a setting that a great majority of the population does not visit on a regular basis.

Fifth, the vast majority of studies on leisure and spirituality have been small-scale qualitative studies (e.g., Fox 1997; Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999; Heintzman, 2000; Schmidt & Little, 2007; Stringer & McAvoy, 1992). Christianity is not tied or linked exclusively to one paradigm, one philosophy of science, or one methodology whether it is quantitative or qualitative. Rather, Christians are concerned with truth and recognize that humans are created in the image of an infinite God. Moberg (1981) warns that anyone who sells out to one particular methodology is in danger of falling into "a form of idolatrous exclusivism, for human reality is far too complex to be covered by any one approach" (p. 213). The appropriate approach is to use many different images and models so as to increase our understanding of social reality. To understand the complexity of human behaviour and human experience, including leisure, a variety of methods are required. Therefore, Christians should encourage the adoption of different ways of studying and understanding the relationship between leisure and spirituality (Heintzman, 2006).

Sixth, there is a need within the leisure studies field to make connections with 20 centuries of Christian spirituality. The spiritual conceptualization of leisure is not exclusively a 20th century insight; long before leisure studies became a program of study in the modern university, leisure was associated with spirituality. For example, both Augustine and Aquinas saw the contemplative life, the life of leisure, as important and essential to the spiritual life. Augustine made the distinction between an active life (*vita activa*) and a contemplative life (*vita contemplativa*). The contemplative life was similar to Aristotle's Life of Contemplation and was adapted from Greek and Roman thought through the addition of Christian content. Both the active and contemplative lives were good, but the latter life was given higher status: "If no one lays the burden upon us, we should give ourselves up to leisure (*otium*) to the perception and contemplation of truth." (Augustine as quoted in Marshall, 1980, p. 7). Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) also used Augustine's distinction of the *vita contemplativa* and *vita activa*. Aquinas, who devoted his life to the reconciliation of Aristotle's thought and the Christian faith, brought together the classical view of leisure and the contemplative life. He located Aristotle's notion of leisure and contemplation in the beatific vision of God (Owens, 1981). Both lives were accepted, but the contemplative life was truly free while the active life was restricted by necessity: "the life of contemplation" was "simply better than the life of action" (Thomas Aquinas as quoted in Marshall 1980, p. 8). An important theme of monastic life was that of leisure (Leclerq, 1982); *otium* came to be "fused with the contemplative life within monasteries and continued to have an association with learning" (Arnold, 1980, p. 131). This monastic life of leisure was expressed in terms such as *otium* (leisure), *quies* (quiet), *vacatio* (freedom), and *sabbatum* (rest), which were used to reinforce each other as in *otium quietis*, and *vacatio sabbati* (Leclerq). This spiritual understanding of leisure has probably been best articulated in the past century by Roman Catholic theologian Josef Pieper (1952) who wrote:

Leisure, it must be clearly understood, is a mental and spiritual attitude--it is not simply the result of external factors, it is not the inevitable result of spare time, a holiday, a week-end or a vacation. It is in the first place, an attitude of mind, a condition of the soul...a receptive attitude of mind, a contemplative attitude, and it is not only the occasion but also the capacity for steeping oneself in the world of creation. (pp. 40, 41)

Pieper's work is a classic within the leisure studies field and his definition of leisure is frequently quoted in leisure studies literature, yet there is little explanation of his definition of leisure within the context of his Christian theology or the 20 centuries of Christian tradition which shaped his understanding of leisure. The history of Christian spirituality has much to contribute to the present study of the relationship between leisure and spirituality yet this tradition is largely ignored. In fact, some present day findings on leisure and spirituality, merely confirm what has been known throughout the history of Christian spirituality. For example, researchers (e.g., Fox (1997; Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999; Heintzman, 2007) have found that solitude in a wilderness experience is important for participants' spirituality. Such a finding is consistent with Scripture passages such as Jesus withdrawing to the hillside to pray (e.g., Mark 6:46) and as Teaff (1994) wrote, it has long been recognized that "Christian spirituality thrives best in a leisure atmosphere where time and space are allotted for 'being' as well as 'doing'" (p. 115).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the increasing scholarly interest in leisure and spirituality presents Christian scholars and practitioners within the leisure studies and leisure services field with a tremendous opportunity and challenge to openly present a Christian understanding of leisure and spirituality. Christians have an opportunity to affirm what is valid in current discussions on the topic, to build upon what is valid, and to enter into dialogue with others. In particular, Christian leisure scholars and practitioners can: critique the interiority of much current spirituality and emphasize both the transcendent and communal dimensions of Christian spirituality; critique the current fascination with spiritual experience and highlight the importance of spirituality as a lifestyle which facilitates transformation; call attention to the concept of spiritual well-being and the use of spiritual well-being scales; explore the relationship between leisure and spirituality in all forms of leisure in all settings rather than focusing on leisure and nature-based leisure; encourage the use of a variety of methodologies to study and understand the complexity of the leisure and spirituality relationship; and draw upon 20 centuries of Christian spirituality to inform our understanding of the leisure and spirituality relationship. While there are a number of areas of concern in the present study of leisure and spirituality which Christians need to be aware of and which they need to critique, they should welcome the increasing popularity of this topic.

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