

GAMBLING AND GOVERNMENT: SOME ETHICAL CONCERNS

A STATEMENT BY MASSACHUSETTS RELIGIOUS LEADERS

The following statement has been prepared by Protestant and Orthodox religious leaders for use by churches, political officials, and the public. We hope it will stimulate dialogue and result in a fresh approach to the issue of government sponsored and sanctioned gambling.

Signers of the Statement

The Rev. Bruce Bueschel, Presbytery of Boston, Presbyterian Church, (U.S.A.); The Rt. Rev. Robert Denig, Episcopal Diocese of Western Mass.; Presiding Elder Herbert Eddy, African Methodist Episcopal Church, Boston District; The Rev. George Elia, East Coast Conference, Evangelical Covenant Church; Rafael M.J. Guiu, Church of the New Jerusalem (Swedenborgian Church, Massachusetts Association); The Rev. Harry Hoehler, The Council of Christian Churches within the Unitarian Universalist Association; Bishop Robert Isaksen, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, New England Synod; The Rt. Rev. David Johnson, Episcopal Diocese of Massachusetts; His Grace Bishop Methodios, Greek Orthodox Diocese of Boston; Presiding Elder Nathaniel K. Perry, Boston District, African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church; Bishop F. Herbert Skeete, Boston Area of the United Methodist Church; The Rev. Dr. Linda Spoolstra, The American Baptist Churches of Massachusetts; Jonathan Vogel-Borne, New England Yearly Meeting, the Religious Society of Friends; The Rev. Bennie E. Whiten, Jr., Massachusetts Conference, United Church of Christ; The Rev. Dr. H. Davis Yeuell, Synod of the Northeast, Presbyterian Church, (U.S.A.); and The Rev. Diane C. Kessler, Massachusetts Council of Churches.

State governments are becoming increasingly dependent on gambling as a source of revenue, and Massachusetts is no exception. The lottery is a state-run operation producing substantial funds both for state and local governments. Now a raft of new proposals, many encouraged by the Governor, are being considered by our legislature. These bills include plans for land-based and floating casinos, video poker, and off-track betting. In addition, the lottery recently launched a pilot project placing electronic games, called "keno," in bars and race tracks. Whether state-sponsored and promoted, or state regulated and taxed, the seductive lure of these proposals is the hope of "easy money" for government operations.

The Massachusetts Council of Churches was opposed to the lottery when it was instituted. We warned about the dangers. We must warn again. This state is on a slippery slope of increased dependence on gambling revenues, and we are careening downward with increasing recklessness.

We have heard the rationales of those who support this trend. "All life is a gamble." "Taking chances is normal." "Life is not fair." "Everybody's doing it." "After all, this is just a private matter." "You can't stop it anyway." The gambling industry--including government-sponsored games--cynically assumes that with the right advertising approach, people easily can be manipulated to part with their cash. Such an attitude shows a callous indifference to the real needs of the poor and the whole citizenry.

Our Christian convictions offer a different view. Our understanding of God in Christ convinces us that life has meaning and purpose; that we should make decisions about our future based on responsible, prayerful judgments, exercising due care for ourselves, our families, and the common good; that labor is a worthy enterprise; that God gives us grounds for disciplined hope. As a society, we have developed an idolatrous dependence on the false god of fortune. As with all false gods, this one is unreliable.

Decisions about public reliance on gambling revenues should be based on the answers to three

fundamental ethical questions: 1) How will it affect individuals and their families? 2) How will it affect our sense of community--of the common good? and 3) What is the proper responsibility of government?

Statistics indicate that poor and working class individuals and families are disproportionately affected by the gambling industry. The people who can least afford to gamble are the most affected. Any family, however, could be at risk if addictive behavior arises. As opportunities to gamble increase (such as placement of keno where alcoholic beverages are served), so does the risk of addiction.

Addictive gambling is dangerous to the fabric of family life. It can lead to physical abuse, substance abuse, even suicide. New studies suggest that teens may be especially at risk, a danger perhaps heightened by current dismal employment opportunities.

Publicly sanctioned and sponsored gambling also creates problems for communities--the need for increased law enforcement, the dangers of illicit enterprises accompanying the legal, the expenses of increased demands on infrastructure, possibly coupled with tax breaks to attract the industries, and the increased need for social services. This can lead to a vicious circle requiring additional revenues, which in turn could prompt government to seek even more gambling enterprises. The short term benefits, if any, are outweighed by the long term costs.

The proper purposes of government are to maintain order, to preserve justice, and to promote the common good. The state has a responsibility to control the indulgences of its citizens within reasonable boundaries. State governments, including ours, now have crossed a boundary between the legitimate control of gambling as a form of amusement, and the inappropriate encouragement of excessive gambling. Government should not be enticing its citizens to gamble, offering the illusion of easy money, or encouraging greed. This fosters a "something for nothing" attitude which is in contrast to the dignity of labor.

For these reasons, we oppose any further reliance by government on gambling as a source of revenue. We urge the gradual weaning of dependence from gambling as a source of revenue. And we urge a fairer formula in the distribution of current lottery revenues to cities and towns that favors communities with heavy concentrations of the poor.

One way to begin this reversal is to eliminate all funds dedicated to advertising the lottery, and to devote all existing lottery revenues to government-funded human needs. A second is to ban the use of Keno.

Gambling implemented by government is not less government. It is different government of poorer quality. Is this the kind of revenue source we want as a community?

Gamblers Anonymous has developed warning signs for gamblers. We pose some warning questions to state government:

1. Are we gambling as a way to pay debts or solve financial difficulties?
2. Are we at risk of "returning to the table" to obtain more money?
3. Is gambling making us careless about the welfare of our citizenry?

In reality, after the gambling mania has passed, we still will have all the social problems we have now--perhaps more. It is an illusion to think that we can solve them through this means. We only will have postponed dealing with them, and then only ineffectively--especially if increased reliance by the state on gambling revenues is coupled with insufficient attention to responsible administration and budgeting, or with decreased reliance on fair taxation as the principal means to support government.

It is not too late to reverse this trend. Those who share this concern must resist the temptation to apathetic resignation. We also must recognize that, to the degree that we resist legitimate and fair forms of taxation, we become part of the problem, rather than its resolution. Rather, we must witness to our concerns--in our churches, with friends and neighbors, and with governmental officials.

Our state government now is gambling with our future, and with the future of coming generations, by flirting with increased dependence on gambling revenues. Let's stop this potential budgetary addiction before it gets out of hand.

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