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Christian approaches to gambling

Rod Benson
Director, Centre for Christian Ethics
120 Herring Rd, Eastwood NSW 2122

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Centre for Christian Ethics
Morling College
120 Herring Rd, Eastwood NSW 2122
Telephone: (02) 9878 0201
Facsimile: (02) 9878 2175
Email: ethics@morling.edu.au
Web: <http://www.morling.nsw.edu.au/ethics/cce.html>

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Introduction

Gambling is the practice of staking or risking something of value, usually money, on games of chance or randomness. The basic tools of gambling are cards, dice and lots. Common forms of gambling in Australia include two-up, lotteries, poker machines, casino table games (such as baccarat, roulette and blackjack), and betting on the outcome of sporting contests such as horse racing and football finals.

Card games involving gambling originated thousands of years ago in China, Korea and Japan, and were later adopted by Islamic and European societies. People used the knucklebone, the precursor to the dice, for gambling as early as 1600BC. Archaeologists have recovered large numbers of ivory, porcelain and stone dice, some of them “loaded,” from the ruins of Pompeii (dating to AD79). Britain and other European countries introduced state lotteries in the 1500s to raise revenue.

Colonial Australians were playing two-up, an adaptation of the English game of pitch and toss, by the 1850s. The first three-reel poker machine with an automatic jackpot payout was built in 1899. Australia’s first legal casino opened at Wrest Point, Hobart, in 1973. Schools, churches and community groups have long held raffles (a form of lottery) and guessing games to raise money for good causes. Many workplaces and schools hold small-scale “sweeps” (sweepstakes) for football and horse racing.

There are several reasons why people resort to gambling. It can be fun, entertaining and exciting. It may enable people to discover and display decision-making skills and coolness under pressure. It may provide an escape from the routine and boredom of much of modern life. It may offer an important release from work and disciplined labour. It may introduce an element of anticipatory hope to people who otherwise see little chance of success or fame.¹

Like drugs and sex, gambling is pervasive and potentially damaging to individuals and communities. Some forms of gambling are associated with criminality and corruption. Some produce addicts or “problem gamblers.” In most

societies the forms of gambling, and the availability of gambling facilities, are restricted by legislation as well as by social mores. It is in the economic interests of governments to regulate rather than prohibit gambling because of its pervasiveness and popularity, the potential for large-scale illegal gambling, and the huge revenue that gambling taxes generate. As former Australian Prime Minister Bob Hawke said, “Gambling is a pleasant form of taxation.”

However, gambling has a significant social as well as economic cost to the community and to individuals. Gambling involves a redistribution of wealth where winners gain at the expense of losers. Unfortunately there are always few winners and large numbers of losers. Further, losers often keep on losing in the hope of one day making a win, and many gamblers have relatively low incomes. Poker machines in particular, by their careful design and placement in certain communities, magnify the detrimental effects of gambling while guaranteeing large revenues for operators and regulators.

The potential for addiction means that some people face distress and financial ruin, with harmful consequences for health, employment and relationships. To address this, governments have adopted various harm minimisation strategies. In Australia, these include limits on the number of poker machines in individual venues (and, in NSW, a cap on the number of poker machines permitted in the state); prohibition on gaming with credit; and a closedown period for gaming machines. Casinos are required to fund treatment services for problem gamblers such as telephone and face-to-face problem gambling counselling services.

For example, the Casino Control Act 1992 requires Sydney’s Star City casino to pay a levy of two per cent of all gaming revenues to the Casino Community Benefit Fund. This fund finances research into gambling and its social and economic impacts, promotes community awareness of problem gambling, and supports organisations that offer counselling and treatment services for problem gamblers, their families and friends. Other strategies that could be implemented include removal of ATM machines from gambling venues; reducing the number of poker machines in operation; requiring poker machines to operate at a slower rate, or to

accept coins but not notes; requiring winnings over a certain amount to be paid only by cheque to prevent immediate reinvestment in gambling; and reducing state reliance on gambling revenue to fund government expenditure.

Christians and gambling

Leading Christian thinkers disagree about gambling. For example, Tertullian (c.155-220) wrote that “If you say you are a Christian when you are a dice-player, you say you are what you are not, for you are a partner with the world.”² But Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) permitted gambling provided that it was not motivated by covetousness, characterized by unfairness (such as loaded dice), or used to exploit the young and psychologically immature.³

A pamphlet published by the Baptist Union of NSW in about 1972 condemned gambling as “an unmitigated evil” and urged all Christians to “refuse to take part in any form of gambling, even such seemingly harmless forms as raffles and office sweeps.”⁴ Yet many Christians today regard occasional gambling as a form of light entertainment, or a valuable means of fundraising for a worthy cause.

The appropriateness of receiving gambling revenue for Christian ministry is, however, problematic. On one hand, some Christians claim, as Mark Twain is reputed to have claimed, “There is no such thing as tainted money. The problem is there taint enough of it.” More generally, some would argue, as William Graham Sumner has observed, that

Money, properly speaking, has no more character than axes of stone ... The ethical functions and character ascribed to it are entirely false. There can be no such thing as ‘tainted money.’ Money bears no taint. It serves the murderer and the saint with equal indifference.⁵

On the other hand, many churches and church agencies are very reluctant to accept money derived from gambling or to raise money through gambling. For example, in 2007 the Sydney Diocese of the Anglican Church passed the following resolution:

Synod considers that parishes and diocesan organisations should not use raffles or other games of chance as methods of raising funds.⁶

Other churches have made statements condemning the practice of gambling in some or all of its forms (see elsewhere in this paper).

Since the Bible nowhere condemns gambling, and indeed regards the casting of lots at worst

neutrally,⁷ on what basis do some Christians argue that gambling is wrong?

A basic ethical distinction may be drawn between the so-called “Catholic” and “dominical” approaches to gambling. The *Catholic approach*, stressing personal virtue, asserts that gambling in itself is harmless, and the danger lies in excess. It is extremely difficult, as Edward Rogers explains,

to establish by abstract arguments that all gambling is inherently immoral without adopting views on the nature of good and evil that do not commend themselves to general acceptance. A small stake in a raffle for a worthy cause, for example, inflicts no conceivable hardship on the purchaser of the ticket and is motivated more by generous desire to help than by anticipatory greed. In much actual gambling, the element of amusement or harmless excitement is not dominated by cupidity. If a number of people join together in a competition in which, by completely voluntary agreement, some will win and others lose, those who win need not be ashamed. In short, when gamblers firmly control their indulgence and are not dominated by it, they may obtain from it legitimate enjoyment that adds color and modest excitement to their life.⁸

Thus, commenting on the Seventh Commandment (“You shall not steal,” Exodus 20:15) with reference to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, official Catholic teaching indicates that

Games of chance (card games, etc.) or *wagers* are not in themselves contrary to justice. They become morally unacceptable when they deprive someone of what is necessary to provide for his needs and those of others. The passion for gambling risks becoming an enslavement. Unfair wagers and cheating at games constitute grave matter, unless the damage inflicted is so slight that the one who suffers it cannot reasonably consider it significant.⁹

However, as the Catholic Conference of Illinois pointed out in 1999, “While this Church teaching may be clear, it also may be difficult at times to evaluate or even specify the particular circumstances that make gambling a moral problem.”¹⁰

The *dominical approach*, emphasising biblical commands, claims that every act of gambling is a particular and concrete action, and to speak of “gambling in itself” is meaningless. Specifically,

the command to love one’s neighbor rules out gain at the other’s inevitable loss, even

if he or she is a willing partner. The decisive consideration should not be the ability of the bettor to risk a loss, but the willingness to accept an undeserved gain ... It is further argued that the moralistic condoning of small-scale gambling weakens the case against commercial exploitation on a large scale, and so puts a stumbling block in others' way. Finally, it is contended that resort to gambling is a virtual denial of faith in God and an ordered universe, putting in its place an appeal to blind chance, prompted by neither love nor rectitude.¹¹

This is the approach taken by the Baptist pamphlet quoted earlier. It identifies four biblical principles that discourage gambling, which may be summarised as follows:

1. *Neighbour-love* (Mt 22:37-40), of which gambling is "a direct negation."
2. *Divine sovereignty* (Mt 10:29-30): reliance on God's loving care rather than "Lady Luck," the stars, or a "foolproof" gambling system.
3. *Stewardship* (1 Tim 6:7-10) of time, talents and resources rather than covetousness and materialism.
4. *Ends and means*: a good cause does not justify employment of dubious means.¹²

These two approaches are irreconcilable. There is, however, much to be said in support of the view of Sydney Anglican ethicist Michael Hill that "gambling just does not fit into the picture of acceptable behaviour presented in the Bible."¹³

Official church statements

In 1977 the Southern Baptist Convention in the United States passed a resolution expressing "vigorous opposition to gambling in all its forms, and especially to the efforts of the gambling industry to legalize gambling by state and national laws."¹⁴ This accords with the ethos of NSW Baptists. In 1987, 1988 and 1990 the Baptist Union of NSW opposed the establishment of casinos in Sydney and Canberra on the grounds that "the social and economic effects on families are thoroughly negative," the provision of gambling outlets was already "prolific," and there were well documented links between casinos and organized crime.¹⁵

The NSW Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Australia stated in 1992 that "gambling is detrimental to the social, moral, spiritual and economic welfare of many people in NSW," and encouraged its constituents "to refrain from

involvement in gambling activities as witness to their faith and as examples to young people in particular."¹⁶ In 2000, the Assembly urged the federal government to ban internet gambling; and urged the NSW government to consider curbing the proliferation of gambling facilities, preventing money-laundering by criminals at Star City Casino, reducing the harm caused by gambling addiction, rolling back the industry in NSW by reducing public and private sector gambling opportunities, and prohibiting advertising by gambling businesses.¹⁷

The Salvation Army Australian Territories released a position statement in 1991, stating that

Since gambling is motivated by selfishness, it runs counter to the Christian expression of love, respect and concern for others ... Official sanction and public acceptance of [gambling] is ... contrary to the Christian principles to which we subscribe.¹⁸

The Seventh-Day Adventist Church states that "Gambling is a curse because the cost of associated crime, victim support and family breakdown damages the quality of life. In addition, gambling is "incompatible with Christian principles" because it is addictive, "clouds the sense of responsibility ... [and] creates false hopes." The SDA Church rejects all forms of gambling, does not solicit or accept funding from gambling, and "calls on all authorities to prevent the increasing availability of gambling."¹⁹

The National Council of Churches in Australia (NCCA) issued a statement on gambling in July 2000. The Council's concerns arose because:

- The last two decades have witnessed an expansion of gambling facilities in all the States of Australia. This expansion has been in the availability of gambling at local, centralised and electronic venues. The local expansions have been mostly in places of entertainment such as hotels and licensed clubs. The centralised locations are in the form of casinos, while the electronic venues occur through the Internet.
- Significant commercial interests have entered the gambling industry and increased its economic and political power.
- The licensing of gambling venues has increased the income of State governments to such an extent that they now rely on it for a significant proportion of their budgets.
- The availability and promotion of gambling has diverted resources from other uses, particularly from families.
- Persons susceptible to problem gambling (2.1% of Australians and 15% of regular gamblers) have increased availability and encouragement.
- Controls on the involvement of criminals in the gambling industry remain inadequate.

The NCCA also observed the following subsequent concerns relating to gambling:

1. The nature of advertising and promotion:

- Advertising for gambling invariably emphasises the possibility of winning without setting out the realistic probabilities.
- Gamblers are represented in ideal terms as young, attractive and happy. They do not represent the norm of actual gamblers.
- Promotion may target cultural tendencies in ethnic communities towards belief in fate and chance.

2. Protection of problem gamblers:

- Advertising and promotional material fails to warn problem gamblers or to indicate where help can be obtained. This lack compares unfavourably with the compulsory warnings on tobacco products.

3. Conflict of interest:

- Government dependence on gambling revenue conflicts with its regulatory and consumer protection responsibilities.
- Government dependence on gambling revenue acts as a barrier to its duty to promote responsible taxation as a civic duty.

4. Regulation

- Apart from a dependence on gambling income, governments are compromised by the commercial and political power of the large players in the gambling industry. Such interests are prone to exploit their position as apparently legitimate interests and their diverse corporate power. Regulation thus becomes a politically risky activity.

The NCCA Executive therefore resolved that:

- The Executive supports the moves of the Commonwealth Government to seek a greater regulation of Internet gambling. It endorses the proposed moratorium on new licenses. It rejects the claims by some State governments that, since people will gamble, the income should stay at home.
- The Executive supports moves that will decrease the accessibility of gambling. These moves include, but are not limited to:
 - the reduction in the number of gambling venues and gambling machines;

- increased information about the risks of problem gambling;
- the removal of ATMs and credit facilities from gambling venues;
- increased publicity at gambling venues about the winning odds of specific methods of gaming, particularly gaming machines;
- increased provisions for community control.
- The Executive supports moves to increase and monitor the resources available for the counselling and other treatment of problem gamblers.
- The Executive supports increased measure to encourage persons to exclude themselves from gambling venues.
- The Executive supports moves that would increase public knowledge about the gambling industry, its benefits and disadvantages.
- The Executive supports the imposition of controls on the advertising of gambling that would ensure a more realistic presentation of its essential characteristics.
- The Executive supports those policy and practice changes that would reduce criminal involvement in the gambling industry.
- The Executive urges governments to consider seriously the extent to which their dependence on revenue from gambling inhibits their capacity to act responsibly in its control.²⁰

Why governments encourage gambling

All of these factors relating to the problems associated with gambling, and the statements by concerned churches, beg the question: why are governments so enthusiastic about supporting gambling, albeit in a regulated environment?

The short answer is that governments are almost always revenue-hungry and consider gambling revenue a soft target for taxation – often at a much higher rate than ordinary taxes on consumer goods or luxury activities. The economic benefit is seen to far outweigh the social cost of gambling. As Vicki Abt bluntly puts it:

State legislators who would never try to legalize cocaine, for example, in order to tax its use, are now willing not just to legalize existing gambling but to encourage new forms of gambling to satisfy the expanding revenue needs of government ...

At a time when all usual tax resources are being tapped to the point of risking taxpayer revolts, officials often see gambling revenues as ‘easy money’ and fail adequately to appreciate the fact that this money represents money that taxpayers no longer have to spend on other consumer or investment ventures that might encourage real growth in the ‘wealth of nations.’ Gambling revenues are nothing more than a transfer ‘flat tax’ that discriminates against the poorest, i.e. those least able to fund public expenditures who spend a disproportionate percentage of their income on state-owned or sanctioned gambling opportunities.²¹

A few national governments have sought to swim against the tide, enacting legislation against some forms of gambling. For example, in 2001 the Bermuda government passed the *Prohibition of Gaming Machines Act*, with the intent of prohibiting the use of poker machines by 2004; but ineffective law enforcement and commercial lobbying have worked against such reforms.²²

What churches and Christians can do

1. Provide opportunities for teaching and learning on the arguments for and against gambling.
2. Decide whether or not it is appropriate for you to participate in gambling activities such as lotteries, betting, poker machines and casino games.
3. Know how to refer problem gamblers to professional counsellors or support groups such as the G-line or Gamblers Anonymous.
4. Become familiar with gambling legislation (including proposed changes), and problems of law enforcement, in your state.
5. Call on governments and politicians to do more to reduce the prevalence of gambling in our communities, to develop sustainable alternative sources of state revenue, and to support those for whom gambling is a problem.
6. Support and encourage politicians and other public figures who oppose gambling.
7. Work with business and community organisations to discourage advertising and sponsorship of gambling.

Further reading

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- Productivity Commission, *Australian Gambling: Industries Inquiry Report* (Canberra: AGPS, 1999); available at <http://www.pc.gov.au/inquiry/gambling/finalreport/index.html>
- Public Health Association of Australia, “Gambling and health,” available at <http://www.phaa.net.au/policy/gambling.htm>

Useful websites

- <http://www.gamblersanonymous.org.au/>
Gamblers Anonymous
- <http://www.gisnsw.org.au/>
Gambling Impact Society (NSW)
- http://www.olgr.nsw.gov.au/gaming_home.asp
NSW Government’s Office of Liquor, Gaming and Racing, with detailed information on gambling
- <http://www.smartgambler.com.au/>
Advice for gamblers (pro-gambling)

References

- ¹ Vicki Abt, "Gambling," in Paul Barry Clarke & Andrew Linzey (eds), *Dictionary of Ethics, Theology and Society* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 393-394.
- ² Tertullian, *De Spectaculis*, xvi.
- ³ D.H. Field, "Gambling," in David J. Atkinson et al (eds), *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology* (Leicester: IVP, 1995), p. 402.
- ⁴ Baptist Union of NSW, "A matter of concern: gambling," n.d., pp. 4, 5.
- ⁵ William Graham Sumner, *Folkways: A Study of Mores, Manners, Customs and Morals* (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2002), p. 156. [reprint of a late 19th century book]
- ⁶ Third Ordinary Session of 47th Synod, Sydney Diocese of the Anglican Church, 24 Sep 2007, available at <http://www.sds.asn.au/Site/103750.asp?a=a&ph=sy>. This Synod also passed resolutions on poker machines, keno machines and the dangers of gambling.
- ⁷ See, for example, Job 6:27; Ps 22:18; Joel 3:3; Obad 11, Mk 15:24; Ac 1:23-26.
- ⁸ Edward Rogers, "Gambling," in John Macquarrie & James F. Childress (eds), *Westminster Dictionary of Christian Ethics* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), p. 244.
- ⁹ Catechism of the Catholic Church, Part 3, Section 2, Chapter 2, note 2413, available at http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s2c2a7.htm
- ¹⁰ Catholic Conference of Illinois, "A Catholic Perspective on Gambling in Illinois," Dec 1999, available at <http://www.catholicconferenceofillinois.org/bins/site/ftp/Gambling%20Statement.pdf>
- ¹¹ Ibid.
- ¹² Baptist Union of NSW, "A matter of concern: gambling," pp. 2-3.
- ¹³ Michael Hill, "Should the stewards object? A biblical approach to gambling," *The Briefing* 305, Feb 2004, available at http://www.matthiasmedia.com.au/briefing/webextra/fcb04_gamble.htm
- ¹⁴ Foy Valentine, *Issues & Answers: Gambling* (Nashville, TN: Christian Life Commission, Southern Baptist Convention, n.d.), p. 1
- ¹⁵ Rod Benson (ed.), *Here We Stand: NSW Baptists and Contemporary Social Issues* (second edition; Glebe, NSW: Baptist Union of NSW, 2004), pp. 35-36.
- ¹⁶ Assembly, Presbyterian Church of Australia in NSW, minute 30, section 16 (a) – (c), 1992.
- ¹⁷ Assembly, Presbyterian Church of Australia in NSW, minute 35, section 15 (a) and (b), 2000.
- ¹⁸ "Position statements of the Salvation Army," issued by authority of the Territorial Commanders of the Australian Territories, July 1997.
- ¹⁹ "Gambling: A brief Seventh-day Adventist perspective," Wahroonga, NSW, n.d. The full SDA statement on gambling is available at http://adventist.org.au/about_adventists/perspectives_on_social_issues/gambling
- ²⁰ "Gambling: A statement of the National Council of Churches in Australia," July 2000, available at

http://www.ncca.org.au/departments/social_justice_network/issues/gambling

²¹ Abt, "Gambling," pp. 394-395.

²² For information on Bermuda's gaming legislation see <http://www.liebertonline.com/doi/abs/10.1089/glr.2004.8.238?cookieSet=1&journalCode=glr> and <http://www.bermuda-online.org/abcdba3.htm>