



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 State Lotteries: Gambling with the Common Good
(The Gambling Culture, pp. 29-36)

Suggested Articles:

📖 The History of Gambling
(The Gambling Culture, pp. 88-93)

📖 Gathered by the Lottery
(The Gambling Culture, pp. 52-54)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics
Baylor University
One Bear Place #97361
Waco, TX 76798-7361
Phone 1-866-298-2325
www.ChristianEthics.ws

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Gambling with the Common Good

While their regressive burden upon the disadvantaged is a strong reason for rejecting state lotteries, we should also consider the messages that their promotion conveys to the community. Lotteries, as alternatives to taxation, undercut the development of civic virtues and social responsibility.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Psalm 72:1-7

Meditation[†]

In order for a privileged few to enjoy luxury and extravagance while the many who create the wealth experience hardship, economic marginality, and insecurity, individual possession of wealth must be widely accepted as normal and appropriate.... At a time when chances for economic security are declining for most people in society, the state lottery stands out as a new opportunity for individual economic advancement. The mass media has been widely used to legitimate and promote lottery play, and states send the message that a life-altering opportunity is only one dollar away.... A primary theme in state lottery advertisements is that acquisition of wealth is a wonderful, transcendent experience – and that the opportunity is available to all.

David Nibert

Reflection

Most state governments in America today not only permit organized gambling, they also promote it through their sponsorship and aggressive advertising of state lotteries. This raises questions concerning social policy and the appropriate role of government. Though it is tempting to think of state lotteries as just another 'sin-tax' to raise funds to fill government coffers, the fact that they encourage gambling makes them more significant in conveying values to citizens. "States do not create products such as Wyoming Wine Coolers or Massachusetts Menthols," Julia Fleming points out, "nor do they issue public service announcements designed to encourage drinking and smoking."

Fleming warns that "reliance on the lottery poses a risk both to vulnerable citizens and to the character of the community as a whole." This can be seen by the way that state lotteries:

- ▶ *Encourage people to risk their money*, knowing that a lottery wager will probably bring them no return, and that their success can only come at the expense of their fellow citizens. Why would a government promote and facilitate such use of money over employing it to reduce personal debt, build savings, support charities, or spend in community businesses?
- ▶ *Prey on the poorest and least educated citizens*, for they are willing to purchase most of the lottery tickets. As Heather Vacek notes, "people who possess the fewest resources and consequently can least afford to lose them, gamble the most money in hopes of grasping a share of the American dream."
- ▶ *Exploit the weakness of those with gambling problems*. Only five percent of lottery players account for over half of lottery reve-



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Heather Hughes, the author of this study guide, serves as the Publication Specialist and Project Coordinator of the Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University.

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nues. This is a disturbing testament to how governments drain resources from pathological and problem gamblers.

- ▶ *Encourage a superstitious belief in lucky numbers* by advising players to choose numbers with a special meaning for them. State governments should not exploit superstitions about numbers, which have theologically troubling implications for the relationship between luck and Providence.
- ▶ *Impede civic virtue*. Lotteries circumvent citizens' right to grow through relationship by 'giving back' to the community that has nurtured them. They do this by contributing to the common good through direct taxes rather than gambling losses.

Fleming evaluates state lotteries by more than their utility in raising funds; she asks how they shape the character of citizens. "How a community raises the money to pay its bills is morally significant," she concludes. "If the projects that the lottery supports are essential to the common good, citizens deserve the chance to take responsibility for their community's welfare by funding them directly. If they are not essential, then the risks associated with the lottery (such as an increase in problem gambling) outweigh the benefits of whatever luxuries it provides."

Study Questions

1. According to Julia Fleming, why should we be concerned with the values that state lotteries convey?
2. Fleming admits, "Even those who acknowledge their debt to publicly funded [goods]...may balk at interpreting the chance to pay taxes as a benefit rather than as a necessary evil" and "would gladly surrender their 'right' to make compulsory financial contribution to the common good." Why does she still think we have a "right" to pay taxes used for the common good?
3. Does your state sponsor a lottery? If so, what are the proceeds used for? Consider whether it affects players' view of themselves, the government, and the community.
4. How does Vincent van Gogh portray lottery players in *The State Lottery*? Compare his depiction with the dangers discussed in Fleming's article.

Departing Hymn: "God Help Our Country to Be Strong" (vv. 2 and 3)

God hold our nation's aim sincere,
God save her heart from coward fear,
God prosper her with true success,
and crown her head with worthiness.

From foe without and foe within,
from open shame and hidden sin,
from boastful pride and greedy store,
God keep our nation evermore!

Amos R. Wells (1862-1933)

Suggested tunes: WINCHESTER NEW or LEIPZIG

† David Nibert, *Hitting the Lottery Jackpot: Government and the Taxing of Dreams* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 87-88, 92-93.

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Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To distinguish government promotion of gambling through lotteries from the licensing and regulation of the gambling industry.
2. To consider what values are conveyed to its citizens by a state's promotion of gambling.
3. To examine how state lotteries affect the development of civic virtue and the common good.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *The Gambling Culture (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "God Help Our Country to Be Strong" locate the familiar tunes WINCHESTER NEW or LEIPZIG in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber HymnalTM (www.hymntime.com/tch/).

Begin with an Observation

Despite the troubling questions raised by Julia Fleming and others about state sponsorship of lotteries, this form of gambling continues to have political support. Why? "The reception of gambling in America is complex," Heather Vacek writes. "Political scientist [Alan] Wolfe and theologian [Eric] Owens observe that our culture retains deeply puritanical aspects alongside decidedly libertarian ones. Morality holds great weight, but we also want freedom to believe and act as we choose. American political parties have failed to simplify matters or to rally widespread opposition. Republicans have been more likely to legislate morality, but they remain sympathetic toward business and unlikely to restrict the gambling industry. Democrats prove less trusting of big business, but are more laissez-fair about moral issues. Both groups are more than willing to spend tax and lottery revenues for public projects like funding education."

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to stir your concern for advancing the common good, showing justice to the poor, and developing civic virtue in your community.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Psalm 72:1-7 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

This study helps us more thoroughly evaluate the usefulness of state lotteries; we should not only ask how much money they raise for state coffers, but how they diminish civic responsibility and social virtue in citizens. Julia Fleming builds upon this observation by Erik Owens: "Every action the government takes, every policy the government makes, conveys certain values to its citizens.' So, what values are the state governments indirectly endorsing, or at least tolerating, in their new reliance upon lotteries as a source of revenue?" She

employs Roman Catholic social thought to articulate the relationship between development of personal character and the promotion of the common good.

Study Questions

1. The financial viability of state lotteries has recently been called into question. However, Julia Fleming thinks there is much more at stake in state sponsorship of gambling than the money that can be gained; it “poses a risk both to vulnerable citizens and to the character of the community as a whole.” The study guide outlines these risks under five headings. Form a small group to discuss each risk. The issue is not whether the state lottery is totally responsible for that risk, or responsible in every person for that risk, but whether it is a contributing cause. Think of it this way: would the ideal king in Psalm 72 endorse a social program that ran these risks for a number of citizens? For each risk, consider how citizens are being formed in their understanding and appreciation for civic responsibility and social virtue.
2. Paying taxes can seem like a burden even if we enjoy the benefits that good government makes possible. Perhaps we think governments are wasteful, or spend money on projects that are morally objectionable, and so forth. Or perhaps we just think we need the money for our own projects. However, Fleming is inviting us to reflect on the good things we receive from government (go ahead, make a list) and on the privilege to “take responsibility for [the] community’s welfare by funding them directly.”

The discipline of paying taxes not only funds good public services, but also forms civic character. “Contributions to the common good are not gifts to be made when we feel generous, but obligations that we owe to our fellow citizens as a matter of justice. Yet fulfilling these obligations (and, thereby, sharing in the development of the common good) helps us not only to improve our society but also to improve ourselves. Serving the common good can foster civic virtues. Social beings require civic virtues if they are to become good persons. Character and thus common good thus remain inextricably intertwined.” This is why Fleming objects to replacing taxes (which, in a rightly ordered society, nurtures the good character of its citizens) with the hidden tax of state lottery revenues (which are gained primarily by encouraging the vices of its most vulnerable citizens).

3. At the website of the National Association of State and Provincial Lotteries (NASPL), www.naspl.org/Contacts/index.cfm, you can find information on the recent history, nature, and proceeds of your state’s lottery games, as well as a link to your state lottery’s website.

The reflection by David Nibert (in the meditation) suggests that some players will be grateful to the state for providing them an opportunity for great wealth. Others may thank the government for sponsoring their entertainment. Does this gratitude last, or is it replaced by disappointment and jaded suspicion that this is another way for the government to take one’s money? State lotteries are not the only reason many disadvantaged citizens are suspicious of government, but are they partially to blame?

4. Discuss the tone and composition of the painting. What do the muted colors convey about its subject matter? Review the apparent socio-economic status of the people shuffling into the state lottery building. Do they interact with one another? How would you describe their feelings toward one another?

Heidi Hornik does not believe Van Gogh is questioning the moral suitability of state-run lotteries, but merely documenting a common scene involving the poor people of the Netherlands in whom he was interested. However, she notes there may be an implied critique: “From their appearance...this 1890s crowd may represent the ‘relatively small group of hard-core participants [who] purchase most tickets, so that five percent of the players account for over half of the revenues’ and the poor who ‘spend a higher percentage of their income than their affluent neighbors’ that Fleming describes.”

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.