

GAMBLING AND ITS MORAL DILEMMAS

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Gambling may be defined as the possession of money by an appeal to an artificially created chance where the gains of the winners are made at the expense of the losers, and the gain is secured without rendering a service in value to the gains obtained. (New Dictionary of Christian Ethics, Article by Edward Rodgers, SCM Press).

This excludes the playing of a game of chance wholly for amusement, such as "snakes & ladders" etc. Insurance is not gambling: the acceptance of a gift is not gambling.

Recreational or Trivial Gamblers

Most Moralists accept that one must distinguish between the professional gambler who lives by gambling at places like casinos or towns like Reno or Monte Carlo or Bangkok, and the recreational or trivial gambler. The professional gambler takes to gambling as a style of life: it is to him a business proposition. It was the corruption created by professional gambling that led to the Sri Lankan Government closing down casinos in our Five Star Hotels. The recreational or trivial gambler has a small stake in a raffle for a worthy cause. This inflicts no hardship on the buyer of the ticket. It is motivated by a desire to help a cause rather than by a desire to win. If a number of people join together in a competition in which by voluntary agreement some will win and others lose those who win need not feel guilty at their gain. Where gamblers firmly control their spending and are not dominated by the money factor and such activity is controlled by law (vide below) the stakes may add colour and excitement to their life. They will not deny that they are interested in winning, but that is secondary: the cause for which the raffle or draw is organised is the primary concern. If the above is conceded as a responsible point of view, it could demonstrate that gambling in itself is not wrong. It need not cause defect's in one's character.

Loophole's for Corruption

Those who oppose this view say that the command to love one's neighbour rules out gain at another's inevitable loss, even if the neighbour can afford to lose or is willing to lose money for a good cause, or is willing to lose money in order to add excitement to the game, but whether he is willing to accept an undeserved gain without rendering some service. There is enough corruption in society — exploitation, mismanagement, waste and social justice.

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To add to this the concession that recreational gambling is acceptable leaves room for large scale commercial exploitation and corruption. The difference in degree becomes a difference in kind and can lead to abuse. Further, those of a religious bent of mind would point out that "gambling is a denial of faith in God, and an ordered universe, putting in its place an appeal to blind chance, prompted by neither love nor rightful conduct." (Note: It must be pointed out that the last sentence quoted above is too strong. Surely helping a good cause is a manifestation of neighbour-love, and neighbour-love is right conduct.)

The two approaches conflict. The "liberal" approach disapproves of an exaggerated scrupulosity or fuss about relatively harmless activities. Jesus condemned the attitude of the Pharisees who "strained a gnat and swallowed a camel". He further condemned the Pharisees for tithing mint and rue and neglecting "the weightier matters of the law". Are the puritans being Pharisical or are the "liberals" being guilty of a facile rationalisation? Either is possible.

What is Trivial Gambling?

This is what takes place at a Church Bazaar or Sale of Work or School Fête, or Club Night, where the event is limited to a day or two. Here the law in Britain (and one supposes that it is covered by the law in Sri Lanka) permits raffles for fund raising, where the prizes are usually donated. There are certain conditions on which these are allowed.

- i) The only expense that can be deducted from the money collected are those for the printing of tickets or for the prizes.
- ii) The sum spent on the prizes has to be approved by the State (Rs. 5,000)
- iii) None of the prizes may be cash prizes.
- iv) The sale of tickets has to be done on the day itself.
- v) The people should come for the Bazaar or the Sale of Work and not primarily for the Lottery.

Those who are in favour of trivial gambling say that even if one does not allow it at a Church Sale, it is hard to prevent it when one joins hands with those outside the Church in raising funds for a School or Orphanage or a Counselling Centre. The other members with whom one joins hands may not hold the same views on what may be allowed in raising funds. Should you then compromise in order to accommodate the views of your friends?

If an institution such as a School or Orphanage has been founded by a particular religious body, it is not unreasonable that we should insist that the ethical views of that body be respected.



If a secular group, like the Cancer Society or the Friend in Need Society, were to collect funds and we join in helping, then we cannot insist that they collect money only according to our rules. There are some who say that when you insist on following strict rules you are accused of being a puritan. Now, there is a puritanism that is good (e.g. refusing to have premarital sex) and a puritanism that is unhelpful (e.g. refusing to control the size of one's family) —we must always do the most responsible thing without fear that we may be labelled either "Roundheads" or "Cavaliers".

There are some who are of the opinion that gambling seriously harms a small minority, but that society in general cannot be run on prohibitions designed for the benefit of addicts. There is a suggestion here that what is right is the greatest good of the majority. This may be an acceptable form of utilitarian ethics but falls short of any standards of religious ethics. The fourfold duty of the citizen would require him to do his duty by:

- i) his religion. This he would reckon in terms of stewardship. Is gambling (even in moderation) good stewardship?
- ii) his duty to himself. Is gambling part of a desirable lifestyle?
- iii) his duty to his neighbour. There is many a neighbour who cannot discipline himself to such a degree that he knows when he has taken the one drink too many, or drugs, that make him irresponsible. It is the possibility of doing this in moderation that makes addicts of those who drink or those who take drugs. Few men would desire to destroy themselves or hurt their families if at the start they saw where it would lead them.
- iv) his duty to the community.

So we may conclude that "although society cannot be run on prohibition designed for the benefit of addicts, "nevertheless the responsible citizen has to see that all that is lawful is not expedient" and professional gambling must be ruled out on these grounds.

The question arises as to what our attitude ought to be to recreational gambling, and how does our acceptance of recreational gambling affect our attitude to National Lotteries. It is a curious fact that the Methodist British Statement on Recreational Gambling justifies this activity on the grounds that if the Methodists did so and disabused the minds of the rest of the community that they were no longer "narrow self-righteous puritans", they could be recruited by them in their battle against National Lotteries —which in the eyes of the British Department of Social Responsibility is a social menace. Here we see the ghosts of the "Roundheads" haunting the ethics of the "cavaliers". The argument gets "curiouser and curiouser" and we need to look at the difference between recreational gambling and the National Lotteries even more closely. The justification for recreational gambling lies in that those who indulge in it do so not for the sake of the prize money (which is deliberately kept low), but in order to promote the cause for which the sale or raffle was held. Now, nobody any longer believes that generally good ends

justify doubtful means, but it would seem to be true that if recreational gambling can be justified by the cause for which it is held so also can the National Lotteries. But there is an enormous difference between the two. Whereas the prizes in recreational gambling are deliberately kept low, enormous cash prizes are awarded for the National Lotteries from the money received and the National Lotteries are promoted by a captive media with a missionary zeal that plays on the poverty of the poor and makes them fantasize that the gaining of the cash prize will solve all their problems. We would like to point out to the British Methodist Church that their acceptance of recreational gambling will disqualify the Christian Church from speaking a prophetic word to the nation on the menace of the National Lotteries. The UK Government is bound to use the money hereby collected for social services such as education and medicine and housing etc., as they do here in Sri Lanka. This would stultify their intended project, which is a protest at how the money is being collected and not at the use it is being put to.

National Lotteries

It may be argued that if recreational gambling can be permitted, so also can National Lotteries. In what ways do our views on gambling justify or condemn the widespread sale of lottery tickets? Basically the objection to the National Lottery is the same as the objection to professional gambling. It may be said that if one finds a raffle for a bicycle at a school fête acceptable, one should not object to the National Lottery. In its favour are the following elements. The causes for which the lotteries are State controlled and any abuses can be queried in Parliament. The money collected can be used for the benefit of the community and not for the individual gain. The objection to the National Lotteries has been that, whereas in principle there is no difference between the National Lotteries and the raffle at the School Fete, the scale on which it is done makes a scandal of it. The prizes are cash prizes and are advertised as making millionaires of the winners, unlike at the School Fête. Furthermore, the maimed are encouraged to sell lottery tickets. When the physically handicapped in wheel chairs sell lottery tickets, even if one has no sympathy for the cause sponsored, pressure is put on one because helping the handicapped is an act of charity.

Misuse of the Media for Propaganda

Today National Lotteries are freely advertised in the mass media. They are encouraged as an activity in which the whole family can participate. They are promoted as a social service to the community: "money for you and housing for the masses". They are advertised as giving many chances of a person winning. They are advertised on TV along with an evening's entertainment. They are promoted in a land where the teachings on one's good fortune are seen as a reward for past meritorious actions. One's future is made not by hard work and study and perseverance, but by one's good fortune.



The difference between recreational gambling and the National Lotteries are these;

- i) One wins at the loss of another and the majority who lose are those who cannot afford to do so. It therefore becomes an invisible tax—largely on the poor, as the poor are more tempted to alter their way of life than the affluent.
- ii) One buys a ticket mainly for the monetary gain—unlike recreational gambling, where the cause promoted is a primary concern.
- iii) It teaches a wrong set of priorities.

Capital for Development

The defenders of the National Lotteries say that those who buy the tickets are really not interested in the money gained but in the good of the cause supported—housing, health services, education, etc. This can be disputed. Further, they say that it is a fairly innocuous method of raising capital for the development in an impoverished third world Country. That it raised funds is not disputed, but whether funds for housing, health services and education ought to be raised in ways that in the long run undermine the character of the nation or impoverish the mass of people further, is a matter on which there will always be a difference of opinion. Development is an excellent goal, but does one worship this idol above all else? Robin Hood was a hero because he robbed the rich to help the poor. Here the position is reversed. The poor are robbed, with, of course, their consent, to help the community. Such service to the community ought to be paid by the taxes imposed on the community.

What then is the essence of gambling? This could best be described as the difference we see between a transaction and a gamble. In a transaction, for example, you consult a doctor, and you give him some money for his service. This is a simple transaction. In a gamble, a group of people get together to create artificially an element of chance—say, for instance, by the throw of a dice the gains of the winners are made at the expense of the losers, and the gain is secured without rendering a service to the value of the gain obtained. (See above the definition at the beginning of the article).

Urge To Gamble Has No Limits

We have upto now looked at the subject of gambling as if it were an activity that raises problems for the gambler and the society he lives in. The problems encountered for each individual are, however, very different. While the alcoholic is on a drinking spree he and the family and the neighbours are affected. Once he passes into a coma he sleeps until he wakes up again after some hours. There are physical limits to the problem of alcoholism. So also with the drug addict. The compulsive gambler has no physical curb on his capacity to gamble. His problem is psychological and he suffers a kind of addiction. The more he loses, the greater his urge

to go and turn misfortune into a stream of luck that will wipe out his debts and show a substantial profit and justify his habit hitherto. This would be especially so if he has been gambling with other people's money that he was asked to hold in a trust. This subjects him to intense trauma and anguish of spirit with large doses of self-loathing and guilt. Such a man is reluctant to confide in others and admit to himself and others that he needs help. The worst thing to do is to preach at him and tell him he has done something wrong. This he knows already and hates himself for getting into this situation and he hates the advisor in whom he readily detects a "holier than thou" tone of voice.

Conclusion

All ethical judgements have to take into account the social conditions present in society. Whereas we see the pressure brought on the Methodist Conference in Britain to revise its stand on the question of Gambling in the changed social situation between the 1930s and the 1990s in England, we wish to remind ourselves that we too have to see the question of gambling in the light of the social situation in Sri Lanka today. The National Lotteries are being advertised and promoted in ways that corrupt the values of our youth. They are harnessed into selling tickets as a social service that promotes worthy social ends, such as education, health services and housing. In a land in which the auspicious hour is a national institution, the buying of a ticket at the correct time may earn one rewards. Again the rewards of society go not to the person who studies or trains himself conscientiously or who works hard at his trade, but to the person who became a billionaire overnight and becomes the social support of his entire village and tribe. Recreational gambling may justify itself in that those who participate in it desire not the prize as a primary goal but the cause for which it is held. Nevertheless, if recreational gambling is justified by the Church for good causes, no one can oppose the National Lotteries which are promoted, we are told, for national well-being. We have a duty therefore, as a community, to witness to the truth that to support gambling of any description in Sri Lanka would be an act of irresponsibility.

It must be pointed out that in Britain there are no National Lotteries. We do not know whether the Irish Sweepstakes in Ireland is run by the Government, or whether the opposition to recreational gambling by the Irish Methodist Conference has been due to the impact of the Irish sweepstakes on the life of Ireland. If so, we approve of their action. It had also been said that as some Christian Churches in the Ecumenical Movement accept recreational gambling, so also should Methodists who participate in Ecumenical ventures. This is a bad argument. Right and wrong in the eyes of God or man. Further, those who have made a principled declaration against the National Lotteries and Gambling may have to face ridicule and misrepresentation, but that is no good reason for altering their ethical stand.