

David Pitches considers medical and Christian concerns

A harmless FLUTTER?

key points

UK plans for megacasinos are on hold, but have highlighted problem gambling: 'persistent and recurrent maladaptive gambling behaviour that disrupts personal, family or vocational pursuits'.

Gambling affects individuals and the whole of society. It has a differential impact on the poor and the rich, with associated health consequences.

Although the Bible appears not to prohibit gambling, traditional Christian concerns are more about the underlying principles behind the acquisition and use of resources.

The UK Gambling Act, introduced in 2005, anticipated the development of many new casinos across the country, including several 'megacasinos', which would have over a thousand slot machines capable of delivering jackpots of up to £1,000,000.¹ Advocates claimed megacasinos would create thousands of jobs and regenerate poverty stricken areas. However, critics argued that the plans would increase the number of people addicted to gambling, lead to tawdry new developments, and precipitate crime, both that committed by problem gamblers to satisfy their debts, and organised crime. Ultimately the plans stalled as, in the face of hostility towards megacasinos, the government restricted the number to eight nationwide, then just one. Finally, in one of his first announcements as premier, Gordon Brown ordered a review of gambling, ending any imminent prospect of a megacasinio.²

Risks of gambling

Although the megacasinio is on hold, a recent survey for the Gambling Commission showed that just over two thirds of UK adults had gambled in some way in the past year. At its simplest, gambling refers to any game of chance with a financial risk. For many people, their only form of gambling is buying a National Lottery ticket, but there are other forms, from the traditional tombola or bingo, to casinos, financial spread-betting and internet games. The Gambling

Prevalence Study questioned 9,003 people between September 2006 and March 2007 about 17 types of gambling – from scratch cards to casinos.³

The survey also suggested there are around 250,000 'problem gamblers' in the UK, although numbers have remained steady since the last survey in 1999, despite the rise of online opportunities. Problem gambling is defined by the American Psychiatric Association as 'persistent and recurrent maladaptive gambling behaviour that disrupts personal, family or vocational pursuits'.⁴ It is characterised by preoccupation with, and loss of control over, gambling and inability to desist despite harmful consequences.

With the exception of bingo, men are more likely to gamble than women anyway (71 compared to 65 per cent), but problem gamblers are most likely to be single males, in poor health, and to have a parent with a gambling problem. There is also an association with being black or Asian, separated or divorced, having fewer educational qualifications, and being under 55. Problem gamblers tend to play newer forms such as online games, and the Royal College of Psychiatrists has expressed concern about the difficulty of regulating these to protect people from harm and exploitation.⁵

The strategies gamblers use to secure a continuing income stream can be equally harmful, potentially leading to depression, crime, family breakdown, unemployment and even suicide. Young people who

gamble are more likely to engage in other harmful and delinquent behaviours, such as consuming excessive alcohol, using illicit drugs or smoking.⁶

Perhaps an equally pernicious effect of gambling is its differential impact on the poor and the rich, with associated health consequences. Less affluent people are more likely to play the National Lottery – some doubtless lured by the misconception that happiness can be gained through riches – yet the profits from Lottery sales tend to favour the pleasures of the rich. In economic parlance, it is a regressive form of taxation. Although studies have shown that the middle classes contribute the most in monetary terms, the poorest in society actually contribute a higher proportion of their overall income to the Lottery.⁷

One of the central arguments proposed by advocates of megacasinos was that they would catalyse urban regeneration. This claim has perhaps been insufficiently scrutinised: whilst Las Vegas is known the world over for its casinos, the other major American venue, Atlantic City, has not had such good fortune. Elsewhere casinos have also been criticised for drawing money out of the local economy that could otherwise be spent on more beneficial pursuits.⁸

Christian reflections

Although the government's review is still awaited, the megacasinio proposals have reignited debates about gambling and society. Over the past few years, churches have been some of the most vociferous critics of government gambling proposals. Indeed, most churches would accept that gambling can be harmful, although there is a broad range of views about the extent to which it is morally wrong, or merely something that should not be encouraged.⁹

There are plenty of references to gambling and chance in the Bible, but apparently no specific prohibitions, except perhaps for one reference to forsaking the Lord and spreading a table to 'Fortune', a Semitic god.¹⁰ Casting lots in order to determine the division of the Kingdom of Israel was a divine command given to Moses,¹¹ and the eleven disciples cast lots to determine who should replace Judas Iscariot.¹² Some churches still follow this tradition when appointing elders¹³ on the grounds that casting lots solves disputes¹⁴ and the results are determined not by chance but by the will of God.¹⁵

Traditional Christian arguments against gambling have been more about the underlying principles behind the acquisition and use of resources.¹⁶ Firstly, gambling appeals to covetousness and greed, falling short of the first, second, eighth, and tenth Commandments.¹⁷ Secondly, one's reward is contingent upon someone else's misfortune – by definition, gambling means doing to others what we would not have them do to us.¹⁸ Thirdly, gambling denies the biblical work ethic that associates honest labour with deserved reward.¹⁹ Gambling is not a wise use of the resources we have been entrusted with²⁰ and like other addictions can lead to loss of self-control.²¹ It also moves us away from dependence upon God for our daily needs.²² At a wider society

level, we read elsewhere about the anger God feels when the poor are exploited.²³

A Christian response

How concerned should Christians be about gambling? Some individual Christians will be directly affected, either because they or a close friend or family member are experiencing problem gambling, or because they work in some capacity for the industry. Should Christians work for a casino? If not, does performing as a musician at a concert in a casino count? Does the tombola or raffle have a valid place in church fêtes, and if not, should we allow games that guess the weight of cakes on the grounds that these may be perceived as games of skill rather than chance?

Many churches have had to grapple with the ethics of applying for National Lottery funding. Economically speaking, there is an opportunity cost: grants given to churches cannot be spent on other projects, perhaps less wholesome. To offer money to a historic building with insufficient funds to tend to its roof, or to build a community centre, is very appealing; perhaps indeed a divine gift. On the other hand, does accepting such a gift imply a lack of trust in God to provide through less tainted channels? Might conditions be attached to a Lottery grant that would compromise the mission or witness of a church? How would local beneficiaries feel about Lottery funding?

From a societal perspective, some have argued that forms of gambling, such as the National Lottery, widen inequalities of income with potentially important implications for health. This is demonstrated by the expanding literature about the association between inequalities of income and lower life expectancy, and is something as Christians we should be seeking to tackle.²⁴ On a more personal level, problem gambling is an addiction and can have medical consequences in the same way as other addictive behaviours. Doctors are encouraged to ask about smoking and alcohol habits, but rarely address gambling in routine consultations. There are several organisations and charities seeking to help those affected by gambling, but surprisingly few Christian resources are available, despite the recent efforts of the church in the UK to address the Gambling Act.

Alongside the medical considerations, what should be our response as Christians to current gambling policies? At a national level, there has been impressive unity amongst churches protesting against gambling deregulation. At a local level you might consider whether you could influence your local council's decision about gambling: Sandwell in the West Midlands was the first council openly to refuse to allow new casinos to be built, citing the negative impact on health in an already impoverished area for the decision.²⁵ Finally, you could consider giving to charities and support groups for people affected by problem gambling.

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resources

- There is wider consideration of the UK Gambling Act at: www.christian.org.uk/pdf/publications/gwof_feb05.pdf
- Support for people affected by gambling:
- GamCare - www.gamcare.org.uk
- Gamblers Anonymous - www.gamblersanonymous.org.uk

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